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THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE

By the Same Author

A LONG DAY'S DYING

THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE

A Novel by
Frederick Buechner



1912
CHATTO & WINDUS
LONDON

**PUBLISHED BY
Chatto and Windus
LONDON**

**PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
LOWE AND BRYDONE (PRINTERS) LTD.
LONDON**

For J.I.M.

Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile,
Hath not old custom made this life more sweet
Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods
More free from peril than the envious court?
Here feel we but the penalty of Adam,
The seasons' difference.

AS YOU LIKE IT, Act II, Scene I

THE
SEASONS'
DIFFERENCE

Chapter One

ALTHOUGH it was eventually to reach a point where there was no longer a great deal upon which they were able to agree, none of them ever denied, either silently to themselves or aloud to one another, the extraordinary summer beauty of the place. In front of the house, if any of its curiously scattered divisions could be accurately singled out for that distinction, the pebbled paths of a flower garden twisted about a central fountain, scarcely large enough for the one stone swan that graced it, and converged at last upon a flight of steps that led down to a lawn lost at either end in the little wood whence the house itself seemed one strange day to have sprung. Beyond this, past a stone wall and down a path, yet another lawn, like the first mossy step in a giant's stair, listed mildly towards a broad and irregularly shaped pond rich in shadow from the trees that grew along its far edge. So dense here and everywhere was the soft green of grass and leaves that it seemed, as if to protect from even the most minor harshness whoever or whatever sought to prosper there, to have left unsoftened no outline of either the house or the landscape.

And then there was the house itself. If the lawn and trees appeared to protect by casting nets of green before the glance of danger, then the low, sprawling structure with its porches and outer stairways, its balconies and labyrinthine arbors might have been said to distract that shattering glance from all but an imperfect view of its own shabby and cumbrosely prepossessing self. By taking the wrong corridor, by forgetting from which of several doors he had stepped out upon a small enclosed terrace or upper porch, or by spinning around three times or four in any of the several gardens and then taking the first path to present itself, a child might easily have lost himself there; whereas many children, who, as a group, tend always to believe that it is not themselves but rather the grown-up world from which they have temporarily and wondrously strayed that is lost, might have made of it all the Emerald City of their giddy Oz, the indulgent nurse of their puzzled desire.

It was partly to escape the children, partly to enjoy at closer quarters the brilliance of the early July afternoon that Sara Fendall Dunn and her husband, Samuel Alonzo Dunn, had descended from their house and rested now on the lowest lawn, at the far side of the pond.

“. . . beer for my hair, lipstick, jar of shellac and a new brush, ribbon, galvanized wire, lettuce . . .” Sara Dunn’s words trembled across the still surface of the water towards the dark figure of a little boy who fished, unnoticed and apparently unnoticed, into a slender finger of the pond across from where they were. The shafts of sun pressed them, like butterflies on cotton, to the patch of lawn where Sara’s bench

stood, and her husband's knickerbockered legs provided a linen hazard for the three orange kittens who struggled with one another for his mild amusement. In the woods just to their rear, the branches overladen with foliage nodded in the appearance of slow wisdom mocked only by the ill-considered fluttering of single leaves.

"Really, Sam," she said, "do talk to me if only because I'm sick to death of talking to myself." But there was no answer from her husband, who, lying beside them on the grass, had placed one kitten gently on top of another to the dismay of each, and she was obliged to continue, perceiving for the first time the boy whom she thought to be out of ear-shot. "You know," she said, "there's nothing quite so exciting to me as feeling the tug of a fish at the end of a line. The tug of a fish at the end of a line," she repeated, and then paused. "Unless maybe it's feeling the wind tug at a kite you happen to be flying. Come to think of it, you might call flying a kite very much *like* fishing—fishing in the sky, of course. Mightn't you, Sam. Sam?"

"Why yes," he said, "if it pleased you. Why not?"

"Why not indeed. And it *does* please me," she went on, "very much. Only what would you be fishing *for* in the sky, I wonder?"

"Well, for God I suppose. If you were Cousin Cowley, that is, and it pleased you."

"Yes." She considered this. "I can just see Peter pulling God down out of the clouds, His mouth all ragged and bleeding. . . ."

"Proposing all sorts of compromises. . . ."

"And with no success at all."

"*If you were Cousin Cowley,*" said Samuel Dunn.

"Yes," Sara agreed. "Peter would catch him if anyone could."

"Except," said Sam, "that he would of course never *set out* to catch anything. I mean that if God wanted to get Himself caught by Peter Cowley, He'd have to go out of His way to arrange it. Like Buddha. You knew that little story, I suppose?" Sara did not know it, and so her husband told it to her in his placid, low-pitched voice, and slowly, so as to prolong his enjoyment of holding with talk, as he had held earlier with silence, her exclusive attention. He told how Buddha once transformed himself into a hare, shook himself three times so that none of his fleas might perish with him, and then leapt into a boiling pot to cook himself for a beggar's dinner. "Judging from what I've heard," he continued, rolling over on his back and allowing the kittens to play on his chest, "that's apparently not too unlike what's actually happened."

"What?" Sara Dunn frowned with curiosity at her husband, who lay near her bench with his eyes closed. There was a little wrinkle beneath the lower lids that gave him the appearance, even when asleep, of smiling.

"I had it from Timmy McMoon, who had it from his mother, who had it from Lundrigan; and Lundrigan, as far as I can make out, had it from the horse's mouth. A vision."

"Whose?"

"Peter's, my dear. Cousin Cowley appears to have had a vision."

Sara Fendall Dunn was a handsome woman, neither young

nor old now, but somewhere in her late thirties. When she wanted something badly, as at this moment, she was more thoroughly herself than at any other time except, perhaps, when she had successfully managed to get it. She had, for instance, both desired and acquired Samuel Dunn, and since she had been profoundly and consistently herself in the process, her husband knew her very well, and there was the possibility of few secrets between them. It was no secret to him that she was passionately curious to know what he had heard, little though it was, concerning his cousin's vision, and in postponing his account he merely made use of the chief weapon he was able to wield in encounters with her. To use weapons like hers, to use ropes and levers and swords and mousetraps, would have been as foolish for him as to have claimed the beauty of the little bald spot at his crown as being superior to her abundance of crisp black hair, and so he flourished his vagueness, his well-bred restraint, like a lance before her, or like a quizzing glass. And he did not immediately enlighten her because, in addition to everything else, the kittens genuinely amused him.

Thus Sara Fendall Dunn, who enjoyed the moderate renown brought her, as a sculptress, by the purchase from her studio of a number of heroically unclad figures fashioned to embellish the façades of various civic edifices, God-damned him, Sam, while the sun continued to fall, bright as pennies, upon them.

"Well, you know how he's taken to going off by himself in the afternoon when he's through with the children. You've seen him start off yourself, after their classes are over and

they're out playing somewhere." His wife nodded impatient recognition of these facts. "He apparently takes walks out into the country and always carries with him a Bible and an apple or, once in a while, a Bible without an apple. I've noticed that much myself. And we're both aware of the trend his life has taken since this Dr. Lavender entered the picture. Well then, all I can add to that is what little McMooon garbled out to me yesterday, and I give it some credence only because, even as the child was presenting it to me second or third hand, I thought I could detect the Lundrigan touch somewhere behind it."

"I do wish you wouldn't talk with your eyes closed," she said, and he opened them.

"On one of these walks, not more than a day or so ago, sitting under some tree and reading his Bible and chewing his apple, if he remembered to bring one with him that time, I gather he saw something of great splendor and holiness." This was, he indicated, the extent of his knowledge.

"Did it speak to him?"

"I don't know."

"Well what did it look like? Who was it?"

"I don't know," he replied. "I think this one must be a male." He held one of the kittens up for her to see, and it gave a wide pink yawn.

"Do you know any more than you've told me?"

"No."

"Well, there's always Lundrigan. I'll at least find out all *he* knows."

"I daresay you will."

An exclamation from the little boy fishing traveled across the pond and caught the attention of Sara Dunn and her husband, who looked in his direction in time to see him stand up and start walking towards the wood. Over his shoulder, on the end of the line, he dragged what seemed a tiny lozenge of silver flipping bright against the shadowed turf. His apparent lack of concern for the prize he had with patience won, and the difficulty with which, at that distance, the line could be seen, made it appear as though the fish followed him of its own will rather than because it was hooked through a stiffening gill, the irrevocable captive of a foreign element. In no time at all, the overburdened branches received them both.

"Which one was that?" Sara asked.

"Little Bundle, I think. He seems to prefer his own company to playing with the others this afternoon. I can't say I blame him."

"Well, it's the others I'm concerned about." Sara modeled her concern partly out of what her husband had told her of Peter Cowley's vision, partly out of a kind of random pity for the fish. "After all, Peter's their tutor."

"And so he has been for the last three weeks." Sam had sat up now and leaned against his wife's white wrought-iron bench with the kittens falling in love with his shoelaces.

"But I don't see how we can think of him as anything but a sort of fanatic now, if there's any truth at all in Timmy McMoon."

"Fanatic?"

"The vision," she reminded him.

"Suppose it was genuine?"

"Well, but I'm not sure that makes any difference as far as his being qualified to have charge of other people's children is concerned anyway, our Fendall for one." She shielded her eyes from the sun. "Poor Peter."

"Suppose it came to him as a conclusive sign of Grace?"

Sara Dunn's laugh was always a thrilling display because of its faintly embarrassed, self-conscious restraint, which suggested an even more joyous series of notes than those which she usually permitted herself.

"How silly of me. That's not *really* funny." She paused. "All right, even if it was such a sign, I'm not going to take back what I said. I'm still not convinced that people who have visions have any right to a job like Peter's, with little children. Wild-eyed, mystic sort of people. Not that Peter's quite that. Still. But I'm getting tired of the whole crazy subject, and it makes me nervous to go on with it till I know more. I really can't think why you brought it up in the first place."

"There's just one thing I'd like you to remember then, before we pass along to other matters." Sam Dunn fixed a dandelion in his button-hole. "Cousin Cowley's presence here this summer was quite as much your idea as it was mine. Nice kitty, kitty, kitty." He directed his attention elsewhere.

Cousin Cowley's presence there that summer had been agreed upon between them late that winter. To have asked him to come simply for the purpose of tutoring and watching over their only child, Fendall Dunn, a boy of twelve, had seemed too much of an imposition, so they had accepted

Cowley's earlier suggestion of permitting him to use part of their house for a small summer school of which Fendall would be part. As a teacher of Latin and Greek at a good preparatory school for boys, he seemed admirably suited to the task; and the house was, after all, quite large enough to absorb with ease the few children who would be involved. There were six of them, not counting Fendall. It had worked out well.

The Dunns remained immobile and silent in the sun, both with their eyes closed, and the orange kittens curled up asleep against one another like expensive toys. It was Sam who was the first to look up at the snapping of a branch behind them. There followed a richly guilty silence relieved only by the hissing of leaves.

"I see you!" he cried, and the small boy who had thought himself hidden intricately and beyond all possibility of discovery was obliged at the sound of these words to crawl out of the suddenly treacherous wood. He was less frightened at being found than he was aghast at the treachery and mystified as to how—through the barrier of what had seemed so many leaves, inconspicuously involved as he had been with the twisted roots of that one particular tree lost among a hundred others, and intimate with the minutest trick of its shape, its touch and very smell—as to how, even granting the age and consequent wisdom of his discoverers, it had been possible for them to find him. Yet, inexplicable as this was, he nevertheless accepted it and greeted the Dunns with the remote and inscrutable glance of one who has peered

deep, if unsuccessfully, into the impenetrably mysterious.

"It's George Bundle," offered Mrs. Dunn, and the words sounded strange to him, for in the company of all those nameless trees he had come close to forgetting what he himself was called. He remembered, and then immediately forgot, how, when he was young, and visitors had come to his house, he had always repeated again and again to himself under his breath George Bundle, George Bundle, George Bundle, so that when at last they asked him his name, as usually they did, usually and superfluously because they already knew it, he would be able to reply without hesitation. George Bundle.

"Wasn't that you who was fishing a little while ago?" Mrs. Dunn continued.

"Yes it was," he answered, without rising from his hands and knees.

"What did you do with the fish?"

What could Mrs. Dunn, who didn't deserve to be asking him questions when it was Mr. Dunn who had really caught him; what did Mrs. Dunn, who knew about clay and how people looked when they were undressed, who spoke his name so that it sounded queer even to him, George, George Bundle, Jawbundul; what could she know, or want to know, about that broken-eyed fish with the torn face lying smelly and ruined, George Bundle, all bloody on the prickly grass?

"I left it," he said with enormous restraint, and so he had, had let it lie crush-eyed and faintly flipping where he had dropped it, when he had finished with it, not far from the pond, but far enough.

"And what were you doing in the trees just now?"

"They were playing hide-and-seek, and I was hiding."

That was true; you hid. And when you hid very close to a tree, you could hear the noise the tiny red bugs made crawling on it, like the click of drying gills. The face of Mrs. Dunn, red-lipped and dry, came nearer.

"How long were you there, George?"

"I don't know."

"See the pretty kittens." Mr. Dunn gestured towards them, and George Bundle was both grateful for his intervention and scorned him for it. There were three orange ones, and they were waking up. The bottoms of their feet were pink, and when Mr. Dunn took one in his hand, it mewed.

"Seeing I'm in the game, I better get back," George Bundle said, and had turned to leave when Mrs. Dunn spoke again.

"Are you having a good time—here for the summer, I mean?"

"Yes," he said, looking at Mr. Dunn. "I play a lot."

"And you like Mr. Cowley?"

"He's O.K.," he said. Cow, he thought to himself. The other day Cow had spelled a word wrong on the blackboard, and that had been rather a good joke until he said he had done it on purpose to test them, and that was a joke on them. Timmy McMoon had not known it was spelled wrong until somebody told him.

"Well," said Mr. Dunn, "it's nice to know that you're enjoying yourself, and you can go on now if you want because

I think we've tapped the deep well of your experience enough for today."

Whatever that meant, thought George Bundle. Mr. Dunn smiled as usual when he said it, Mrs. Dunn's black hair was shiny in the sun, and the boy crawled quickly back into the woods.

Chapter Two

RED LIGHT, Giant Steps, Statues, Sardines, Kick the Can, Nigger Baby and even croquet were good games in their way, and then there were the games made up at the last minute to fit a particular situation or frame of mind, but probably the best of all was just plain Hide-and-Go-Seek. Maybe it was because there was a lot of being alone in it. In Sardines the person who's It hides, and the others, as they find him, join him in hiding until there's only one left, and he's the next It; and that means a lot of people are together at the same time. But in Hide-and-Go-Seek a lot of people are almost never together at the same time, at least not until the cry of "Ally-ally-in-come-free," and then they're together only for a little, until the next game starts. Sometimes you weren't found for several games, but that took courage because it made going back to the others quite scary, especially if the game was all over by then. Everybody looked at you. Ellie Sonntag looked at you through her thick glasses. Fendall Dunn probably screamed.

Ellie Sonntag was It. She counted very correctly and very

slowly and might still, for all George Bundle knew, be picking her way with unnecessary accuracy towards one hundred with her glasses hanging out of her hand and her face pressed against the big tree so hard that you'd be able to see the wrinkles of the bark mapped out on her forehead and know how hard she played. She said she was thirteen, but George Bundle knew she wasn't quite. He knew other things about her too.

The woods were full of underbrush, some of it that was prickly, and some that wasn't, and there was also poison ivy; but he'd eaten some of that once, and now he didn't get it. It was amusing to hide in the poison ivy. He had crawled quite a way into the woods from the pond, and he looked around for another place. Ellie must have stopped counting because he could hear her voice now, and she wasn't saying numbers any more. There was a big hawthorn bush, and he lay under it on his stomach with his chin on the dirt. He curled up his legs. There was no noise at all except the leaves. There were bugs.

What had they been saying about Cow? He knew what they did at night, but they hadn't been doing it there in the sun where he'd found them when he was hiding. They had been talking about Cowley and about God with His mouth all bloody like the fish he'd caught a little while ago. Only the fish hadn't got the hook in his mouth. He had got it in his eye. When you wiggled the hook, the eye wiggled; so he had left it. Were they planning to murder Cow? Cow was all right. He didn't get mad like Mrs. Dunn. Somebody once heard Mrs. Dunn say to Daisy McMoon, who couldn't do

word problems, "You're certainly stupid. You have about as many brains as a cat I have, and he is dead." Everybody had to laugh at that. He wondered if his fish was dead.

It was hot there under the hawthorn bush. He knew now that he was not alone, and his heart-beat drummed against the earth. Almost inseparable from the sound of the leaves was the whisper of voices somewhere to his front. He could not hear what they were saying, but he could guess. Perhaps everybody had been found, and they were coming in a stealthy group to find him. He listened and listened until he could no longer distinguish between noise and ambiguous silence. And then he saw Ellie approach. She walked slowly and with great care, clutching a little knot of skirt in one hand and shielding her glasses from snapping branches with the other. There was no one with her. She stopped so close to where he lay that he might have reached out and touched her bare legs, which stiffened as she peered about for hidors there, and then relaxed a little as she apparently decided that there were none and continued on her cautious way.

A few minutes after her departure, he could hear the voices once more and this time dared to thrust his head out slightly from beneath the sharp leaves that had concealed it. The voices summoned him to join them behind a shelter of nearby pines.

Harry Fogg and Rufus Este were fourteen, and George Bundle was only eleven, but they welcomed him as an equal. George Bundle knew all about Harry Fogg and Rufus Este. Although the two of them had met for the first time only that spring, they were very good friends and were almost

always together. Sometimes they did not play with the younger children. Sometimes they wrote poetry. They took Greek from Cow and wrote it on the backs of old envelopes, on the blackboard, and on the sand at the beach. They were different from the other children, but they were very much like each other. They didn't look like each other though. Rufus Este had red hair and was short and a little fat. He couldn't keep his glasses from sliding down his nose, and his upper lip was so short he couldn't keep his mouth closed. Harry Fogg was taller; he didn't wear any glasses and had dark hair and some pimples. Often, when they talked together, the other children couldn't understand what they were saying. Mr. Dunn said that Harry Fogg was the cleverer and wrote the best poetry; Mr. Lundrigan, Mr. Dunn's friend, said that Rufus Este was. George Bundle had heard Mrs. Dunn say that she couldn't tell any difference. Ellie Sonntag said they were silly and thought they were grown up. Daisy McMoon, who was a little younger than George Bundle, said that she loved them. Timmy McMoon, her brother, said that she would love anybody. Mrs. McMoon didn't like them at all, and Mrs. Dunn said that it was because she knew they were smarter than she was. It was Mrs. Dunn who was going to murder Cow.

"Mrs. Dunn is going to murder Cow," George Bundle told them. They talked in whispers so that nobody would hear them.

"Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh," said Rufus Este and Harry Fogg more or less together.

"How do you know?" asked Rufus Este.

"I heard them talking about it by the pond." George was standing up because his legs were still cramped from his wait underneath the bush. The other two boys sat with their backs against a pine tree.

"What did they say?" asked Harry Fogg.

"They said that God was all bloody like a fish."

"That sounds like a bad poem," said Rufus Este. He sneezed and made the rasping noise with his throat that he always did. Everybody had thought at first that he did it to be funny, but he had explained to them that it scratched the tickling. "I think you're making it all up."

"No, I'm not!"

"He's not really," said Harry Fogg.

"No, I'm not," George Bundle said. "They're going to kill Cow because he's a magician. He saw a magic thing under a tree."

"Oh, *that!*" said Rufus Este. "He's supposed to have had a vision under a tree. We heard about that from Timmy. He'll probably tell about what he saw, and a new religious movement will sweep the earth like a plague."

"Rats spread a plague," said George Bundle.

"Yes, they do," said Rufus Este. "When they've finished with one country, they climb aboard a ship and sail to another to spread it there."

"Yes," said Harry Fogg. "And you have to do all sorts of things to keep them off those ships. The rats dress up like people, you see, and it's very hard to spot them. They wear

hats to cover up their ears, and tight-fitting yellow gloves."

"And long overcoats," said Rufus Este, "and narrow black shoes."

"It's the black shoes that make it hard for them to walk," said Harry Fogg. "That's one way to spot a rat. They shuffle. But then they sometimes carry canes, and that makes it harder."

"Oh it does," said Rufus Este. "So the people post guards at all the gangplanks, and the guards try to find out which are rats and which aren't."

"It's a hard job, believe you me," said Harry Fogg. "They dress up so cleverly and wear just the right kind of clothes and carry exactly the proper kind of luggage. It's almost too perfect, and really the only ones who can tell rats from people are other rats."

"So," said Rufus Este, "the people get good rats to be guards."

"And even they let a few slip by," said Harry Fogg.

"It's a terribly difficult thing," said Rufus Este.

"Because they go to such *elaborate* lengths to look like people," said Harry Fogg. "When they're all muffled up in their hats and overcoats, they look more like people than people do."

"That's the trouble with rats," said Rufus Este.

"Yes," said Harry Fogg. "They never know when to stop."

"Shhhhh!!" hissed George Bundle, "I hear somebody coming!"

When Harry Fogg and Rufus Este started to laugh, it was very hard to stop them. Harry Fogg's voice had changed,

but his laugh hadn't, and it came in uncontrolled shrills. Rufus Este's was more of a giggle, but it was equally uncontrolled and loud. George Bundle tried to quiet them again but without success, for Ellie Sonntag appeared behind them, and they all had to start racing through the woods towards the big tree that was their goal. George Bundle was the first to reach it, and he shouted with such vehemence that it drowned out the laughter of the two friends and Ellie's protests that someone had tripped her on purpose, and she was afraid her glasses were broken.

"Ally-alley-in-come-free!!"

From various points around them the remaining children came running. Plump and, like his mother, dark, Fendall Dunn screamed past Ellie Sonntag, who was too intent upon mourning her glasses to try to tag him or any of the others. Daisy McMoon and her brother came from different directions but reached the stout trunk at the same time. George Bundle surveyed his handiwork with business-like detachment. It was he who started a movement up the rope ladder to the tree-house above them. A number of broad planks had been nailed between two branches of the oak to make a platform large enough for all seven of them, and at one end several more planks formed a small shelter partially concealed by the leaves.

When children ask "Why is the grass green?" it is not because they want to know *why* it is green but, more simply, if it is *all right* that it is. Recognizing this, one can have no difficulty in seeing the answer "It's green because it's green" as entirely adequate; and neither, of course, can the child.

When Daisy McMoon, who sat just inside the shelter in view of all the others, among whom she was the youngest, asked why it was so warm suddenly, her brother replied that it was because it was; and there was no need for further explanation. Daisy herself needed none, and only gave a little sigh. She wore a yellow dress which never successfully concealed for long the two flecks of pink which marked where one day her breasts would be. Her upper lip and the patch of forehead beneath her yellow hair were damp from the chase through trees, and she fanned herself with a leaf.

"You broke your glasses good," said Fendall Dunn to Ellie. His face glowed beneath his black hair like a small red lamp.

"No I didn't. I only cracked one lens." Ellie was almost as tall as Harry Fogg, and spoke with some embarrassment because she realized that she was addressing the whole group.

"You're cracked anyway," said Fendall with relish. Ellie's suffering was apparent to them all.

"Well, you're a cry-baby," said Timmy McMoon.

"I am not!"

"You cry whenever anybody pinches you."

"I do not!"

"Why don't you pinch him and see?" suggested Rufus Este.

"Go on, pinch me," said Fendall, extending his arm. No one cared to.

"Tomorrow is the Fourth of July," said Daisy McMoon.

"Fireworks!" cried Fendall.

"Sparklers and Roman candles," said Daisy.

"Pinwheels," said Ellie with some reserve.

"St. Catherine wheels," said Harry Fogg.

"What are they?" asked Daisy.

"They're like pinwheels," Harry explained, "but they're called St. Catherine wheels because they're like the wheel that St. Catherine was tortured on."

"What do you mean?" asked George Bundle, who had been silent.

"A wheel with great spikes on it that tore through her flesh when it was revolved."

"Did it hurt her?" George asked.

"Terribly," answered Rufus Este. "Like a hundred hypodermic needles all at once, only worse."

"That's like what Mrs. Dunn said *she* would do," George said, half to himself.

"To who?" asked Ellie.

"To God."

"My mother never said that!" Fendall Dunn brought his fist down on the top of the shelter.

"Yes she did. I heard her. She said she would bloody His mouth," said George. Fendall brought his fist down on the shelter once more.

"Cow said he saw God under a tree," said Timmy.

They were all silent at this. A light wind blew to cool them, and patterns of green were shifted throughout the woods about their tree.

Daisy started to cry. She sat just as she had been sitting before, but her face was wet with tears. No one noticed this until she spoke.

"Fendall made so much noise with his fist. The poor lady torn up by the wheel and God all bloody on His mouth . . ."

"Never mind, Daisy; never mind, little Daisy," said Harry Fogg in a low voice, almost as though he might cry himself.

"Grownups are awful," said George Bundle with fierce conviction. "We'll play some horrible tricks on them tomorrow, you wait and see."

"My mother never said that," whispered Fendall.

Although the sun still shone brightly on the house and the lawns, it was already becoming evening in the woods where the children played.

Chapter Three

“WELL, and Peter went to the city after lunch today to see this Dr. Lavender of his we’ve none of us ever met, and he won’t be back till tomorrow noon, so, my dear,” Sara closed her eyes and drew up her shoulders as she frequently did when relating facts she felt might not be of interest to her listeners but out of which, for lack of anything more suitable, she found herself making conversation. “So,” she continued, her eyes remaining closed until she had finished her sentence, “the kids simply got themselves to bed and, I must say, very quietly and well too. I did feel rather nervous about it, but that rather grim little Sonntag girl will never put up with any nonsense, and the rather peculiar Fogg and Este pair is more or less sane when you come right down to it, so it all went off well enough. But still. Anyway, that was that. One of the few stipulations, you see, that Sam and I made about the whole affair right at the beginning was that we weren’t going to supply any more than bed and board, absolutely no nursemaiding of any kind—can’t you imagine what life would be otherwise?—and so far, I keep my fingers

crossed, we've had no trouble. Thank Heaven. Because Fen-dall is quite enough, after all. Quite enough," she concluded, "though he is a dear, of course, too." It was evening, and Julie McMoon had been the first guest to arrive for dinner. Lundrigan had not yet appeared.

"My two were *exhausted* when they came home," answered Julie McMoon, directing her words partly to Sam Dunn, who stood making cocktails at the far side of the book-lined living-room. He answered over his shoulder that children were never exhausted and smiled at Sara, who returned it. It would have been difficult to say which of their two smiles was the more successful. Sam's, although it occurred so frequently, so almost endlessly, that one might have grown not to notice it at all, was gentle and so generally relevant to the situations his affable presence tended to create that it could never be altogether discounted; while Sara's, far less frequent than her husband's, seemed always a revelation of extraordinary intimacy asking disarmingly its own forgiveness. Indeed, Julie alone could have made an easy choice between them, and she, without hesitation, would have decided in favor of Sam's. To have known in some detail why would be to have known a good deal about her.

It would be, among other things, to have known that before the days of her widowhood she had, in her own untidy, bemused and nasal manner, loved her husband to the exclusion of all others, and that this love endured to the present despite the fact that death had been of his own choosing since he had, after all, in the early hours of an autumn morning, his children asleep and his wife not fully awake yet but pouring

coffee for his breakfast, both courted and won it with passion and stealth and without even troubling to leave the note of explanation or farewell commonly required by the curious traditions governing such occasions. It was not that a note would have actually explained anything to her, they admitted, but a number of people, and his friend Lundrigan among them, who forgave the late Tim McMoon everything else, condemned him still for that one omission and sighed to observe what seemed to have become as a result Julie's most characteristic expression: a quizzical stare, half amused and half grieved at her own puzzlement. She had loved him not, as many had romantically guessed, because of his weakness, his whiskey and ice, nor defensively in spite of it, but because of his strength which, had she ever stopped to examine it, she might have explained as partaking of his ability to make a good living writing advertising copy with a success unmarred by the fact that he happened to deplore it, of his frequently profane and Irish sense of comedy, of his proficiency on the guitar, and more besides, none of which she referred to now any more than she had when he was alive. At all events she had loved him, loved still anything or anyone who reminded her of him, and hence it was that she continued to see Lundrigan, his friend; why she would, without hesitation, have chosen Sam's smile, which now she returned.

"Speaking of children," she asked Sara, "how has your model trouble been lately?" Sara looked at her with the perturbed frown that could possess her face as suddenly and completely as her laugh, which came often, as now, in close conjunction with it: "What do you mean? Ah, I see what you

mean, and that is, of course, amusing," they seemed to say.

"Oh not much trouble really," she said, "because I still have my wonderful Mollie. She's coming down from the city in a few days. But why do you ask?"

"That's not what Julie means," said Sam Dunn, opening a calf-bound book he had brought with him from the shelves.

"I mean are they any trouble when they're *here*. You know," Julie McMoon explained. Her way of talking idly through her nose flowered always with especial effulgence in the presence of Sara, who spoke in low, eiderdown tones and, no less endearingly, as though through a heavy mist.

"She means this," said Sam and thrust the open book before his wife. "This sort of thing." On the page that he displayed trembled the steel-engraved reproduction of a Renaissance nude reclining on her side, in one hand her head, in the other her virtue. "The great open secret," he continued, returning with their cocktails and leaning over the back of the couch to observe the picture on which he commented.

"Oh, I *see* what you mean," said Sara. "You mean with the children." She laughed and flipped the book closed in his hand. "My trouble is about to begin then, to answer your question. You remember how I told you they stood around gaping when I was trying to get the satyr done. I got the laundress's little boy to pose for me afternoons—wonderful legs on the little creature and absolutely unselfconscious. Well, you'd think they'd never looked at themselves in the mirror, the way they carried on. I'd shout them out of the studio, and the next thing I'd see would be their noses flattened out against the windowpanes."

"Little voluptuaries," said Sam.

"And by the time about a week of sittings were over, the little laundress' child was so inhibited he would hardly take off his shoes let alone his pants, and it will be seven times worse this time, I'm afraid."

"Oh *tell* us," urged Julie McMoon.

"This time it's to be a thing called *Abundance* commissioned by some association of mid-western states for an exposition. They pay well, and that, between us, is a good part of my motive. Still, one huge nude, female of course, and piles of wheat and that kind of mess is what's called for. I'll do it life-size in clay, and then they blow it up to something like four times that. As soon as the model gets here from the city, I start work, and then—you're quite right—I will have rather a . . ."

Sara was interrupted by the entrance of Richard Lundrigan, who, finding his way unbarred, seldom waited for admittance. He, alone among those gathered there, was nearly as dark as Sara herself, and with his sharp and rapid sleight of feature seemed to represent a different species altogether from Sam, who was graying, and the significance of whose mien had always to be interpreted in terms of the subtly varying smile he wore. On vacation from a publishing firm in the city, he was staying for a few days with Julie McMoon, who received him warmly not only because he had been perhaps the best of her husband's friends, but because her two children were fond of him and she herself prized him, even apart from his connection with her happier past, as being decisive and clever where she, for her part, tended to be

uncertain and vague. As "Luggindran" the newcomer was greeted by her, who knew him best; as "Dick" by Sara; and as "Richard" from Sam, who pronounced it sonorously, handed him, almost at once, a glass, and whose eyes alone smiled as he submitted to the wit of his newest guest the problem they had been discussing.

In the semblance of anger lost somewhere in comedy, his fingers as restless upon the drink he held as were his black eyes upon their three faces, Lundrigan took them up on it almost immediately. This was a subject whereby he felt he could display that mature liberality of mind in which, of all other qualities, he most prided himself, and he applied himself to it with immediate zeal.

"Damnedest thing I ever heard. Terribly stuffy!" His words came always with crisp speed. "What if they do see this hired nakedness of yours, and big as life too? So what if they do, tell me?"

"But this particular one is so particularly . . . uninhibited," said Sara with an amused little pause that suggested a wealth of supporting evidence. "One look at her, and they may . . ."

"Nonsense, nonsense. Honi soit, I say. They'll all come to it one day anyway, each in his own fashion. Absolutely immoral, this artificial prolongation of innocence."

"Luggindran, Luggindran," echoed Julie McMoon in vague horror. "Immoral?"

"I don't think it is," said Sam, in a different key. He stood in the center of the low-ceilinged room, his scarcely noticeable paunch thrust slightly out, rocking forward on his toes.

"Oh let's *not!*!" exclaimed Sara to her husband with a kind of distracted desperation and what might be thought of as a tendency in her so to prey on the mildest spirit within her reach. "I *hate* arguments because everybody always tries to be clever, and I hate that too."

"Let's!" said Lundrigan.

"Lundrigan's just an old voluptuary himself," murmured Julie, half into her glass, her eyes startled and humorous above its rim.

"Julie!"

"Yes you are. Otherwise you wouldn't talk the way you do, would he, Sam?"

"I wouldn't pretend to answer that," said Sam. "But I will pretend this, if you'll permit me a conceit of some length—" he made an ironic little bow—"that a child, any child, is a garden, and a garden without a wall, you see." He tipped back on his heels and was gratified to notice that they did *not* see. This was something he could do better than Sara, he knew, better than anyone there that evening in fact, and he spoke slowly with a delicate sense of the effectiveness of not only each word as he pronounced it, of each soft intonation, but of even the refinements of shadow about the corners of his deep-cut mouth and eyes. From moments such as this, he understood, they recognized and never entirely forgot that they enjoyed this house and room, these hours, and Sara too, as something as specifically *his* as was the collection of seventeenth-century writers, poets and travelers, with which the room where they now sat, and the larger part of his leisure too, was occupied.

“Anything can enter there,” he continued, “and anything can depart, quite at will, as long as the wall-lessness lasts: birds and friends, secrets, hates, games, fear, and magic of all sorts—free to come and free to go as the wind bloweth. But then,” he looked down at the carpet, “after a while, not gradually so much as all of a sudden, over the course of a few days even, a wall appears, and then,” he paused, “the garden is enclosed. Whatever is there is there to stay.”

His placid smile grew more general and, still standing, he raised his glass to his lips. Lundrigan started to speak, but Samuel Dunn proceeded, interrupting him, as though he had not heard. “That’s perhaps why, in a sense, your only friends—your only *real* friends; you understand—are the friends of your childhood, the ones who were able to enter easily while there was still no barrier; why love, which doesn’t come till later, of course, is a matter so entirely different; and it’s also why I say you’re wrong,” he nodded towards Lundrigan, “in wanting to permit these children, little voluptuaries though they may by inclination be, entrance to what Sara, Julie too I think, and of course your servant,” he indicated himself, “think should be hidden from them. You’re right that they’ll all come to it in their own fashion anyway, but let it *be* in their own fashion, not ours, not in the guise of a model that Sara hires to pose for her. Let nakedness, and all things like nakedness—this is a real conceit and doesn’t have to be limited—enter their guileless garden if you like, but not in a shape called *Abundance*. Let it come in hesitating and young or however it likes, to be called *Not Quite Enough* or maybe

Mystery even or "My America, my new found land! My myne of precious stones . . ."

"Or *Slush*," said Lundrigan, laughing in his chair, "or *Prudery* or *Poppycock*, if the ladies will excuse me."

"Now I agree with him," cried Sara, "and, damn your eyes, you can't call me a prude!" She pronounced these last words fiercely, as a credo almost, and was delighted with what she felt to be a sense of cymbals, bizarre and raucous, as though her own potential nudity came writhing in astride a spangled buck elephant through the tents of summer dusk that filled the room. The applause of leaves excited by the legerdemain of an evening wind came deafening through the opened window.

"I don't call anybody anything," Lundrigan spoke loudly to make himself heard above the general din that existed nowhere so much as in his own mind and theirs, "except children."

"And what's that?" asked Sam.

"What do I call children? Why, I call them beasts, of course; yes, beasts at best. I call them little animals dressed up to look like little people. What else? They may fool you, but not me."

"They fool *me*, you mean?" asked Sara. "Not on your life. That's why I shoo them out of my studio. That's why they're a problem—just because they *don't* fool me."

"Well, but you handle it in the wrong way then, you see." Lundrigan thrilled to the sense that he was prepared to refute anyone on any subject, defeat them on their own ground

even, and he laughed then to seem finally disinterested in such a victory. "You don't turn little animals into authentic humans instead of make-believe ones by shielding them always. A pig doesn't stop being a pig just because you shoo him away from the sty. No, no. Let him stay in the sty until he reaches a certain point, and then . . ."

"Then what?" asked Sam. "What then, Richard? How does a pig stop being a pig?"

"By getting roasted over a hot flame! And then what, you ask? Why, then he's a dish fit for a king, and everyone, absolutely everyone, makes a special point of forgetting that he was ever a mud-snuffling, piglet-begetting pig." Lundrigan smiled at his own words. "At long last you find you can really enjoy him; digestively speaking he becomes quite a part of you, in fact."

When Lundrigan finished speaking, Sam, although he complimented him with amused indulgence on his ingenuity, insisted that he had scarcely, however, proved his point; and consequently Lundrigan, who had shown himself willing to let the matter rest, was obliged to take it up once more. Even if he hadn't proved his point, Julie had said, he was nonetheless being amusing, to which Sara had added that he was on the contrary, in her estimation, being hideous, as she put it. Surely he must realize, she had continued to him, that it was better for the children to have certain things kept from them at this stage.

"O.K." said Lundrigan with zest, "O.K. Maybe it is better for them—it isn't, of course, but we'll say it is—but what about you? You can never keep them away from anything

forever, you know, and what becomes of you when you fail finally, when they find out for themselves? You say you want to keep your 'certain things' away from them only for the time being, but you mean, of course, forever, and that won't work; you'll fail. They *know* you'll fail, the kids, and that's, I swear, the only reason they have for stringing along with you to the extent they do." Lundrigan found himself doing more, as he spoke, than making a point for its own sake; and this, coupled with his recognition of deeper interest among his listeners, moved him to greater enthusiasm.

"They string along with you and get as much out of you as they can along the way because, oh, they're the bright-eyed, cleverest thieves of all. What they rob you of, God only knows, but when it's gone, you know damned well it's gone, by God!" He tipped his dark head back to get the last drop from his glass, and continued then, his lips damp. "Just look at schoolteachers, look at Peter Cowley! Ask them what they've lost through years of shielding kids from Lord knows what! I say fetter the tribe with experience beyond their grubby little years, swaddle them with knowledge of the nude and tragic as soon as you can, or else, so help me, they'll arise, unite, and raze the bloody world!"

"Oh screech!" cried Julie McMoon. "Screech, screech!"

"Well, is there anybody who hasn't said his little piece now?" asked Sara. "I do hate . . ."

"Toddlers, arise!" cried Sam. "You've nothing to lose but your . . ."

"Nuts!" exclaimed Lundrigan, "nuts to . . ."

"Oh stop, stop," said Sara. "Stop shouting. I'm shouting

myself. . . ." With her smile, with her slow laugh she sought to restore a kind of order. "We must all stop." Her eyes followed Sam, who came to her aid and for the third, the fourth or fifth time, passed among them with the chilled glass pitcher. So impartial was he with his charm and gallantry, she thought, that a stranger arriving suddenly among them would never have guessed 'o which of the ladies he was married. His manner was equally serene, courtly and solicitous to them both, and though she was not saddened by this and knew him too well to be made jealous by it, it angered her. It was always so, however many ladies there might be, whoever they were; he had no concealed, seducer's motive with them, she knew, his chivalry was curiously sincere, yet it angered her nevertheless. Surely, surely, she thought, he should make some sign of his particular commitment to her that everyone, that she at least, could recognize. But he did not. In reprisal, or as a way of making such a sign herself, she yearned to proclaim some profound and unmentionable intimacy of their life together, to betray to them all some ludicrous trick of his lust as now he passed her gently, courteously by. Instead, she merely pretended not to notice him at all and directed herself to Lundrigan.

"To bring the whole silly thing to an end," she said, "I ought to explain that I'll hide what I hide for my own sake as well as for theirs. Perhaps more. I don't pretend to be just sweet, righteous old Mother Dunn." She laughed. "My work is all I have that's completely my own—trite, isn't it?—and I don't want them around spoiling it for me. I don't want anybody around. I couldn't make it much simpler than that,

could I?" There came into her voice whenever she mentioned her work, her sculpture, a kind of challenging rudeness as though she dared her listener to deny that this talent justified any number of still greater improprieties.

"You couldn't indeed," replied Lundrigan.

"Well then. I do what I do mostly for myself, granted, because I just don't want to be bothered when I'm working, and only by accident, along the way so to speak, keep Sam's wall-less gardens, the children, safe from naughty reality. Or, to use your language, maybe I'm keeping naughty reality—the laundress's boy, the models—safe from *them*. At any rate, I shield them from one another because it happens to fit in with my own wishes, and, come to think of it, there's someone else I shield."

"Who?" asked Julie.

"Don't you know, Julie?" replied Lundrigan. "Cowley, of course."

"Yes," said Sara. "Cowley. I'll be hiding it all from him too."

"Oh, did Dick tell you what Cowley told *him*!" exclaimed Julie to the Dunns. Sara declared that he hadn't, and prevailed upon him to do so. She suspected that it would be in essence little more than she already knew, but this time it would have the flavor of greater authenticity.

Two days earlier, on Friday, Lundrigan had arrived at the McMoons' from the city to spend a week of his vacation with them. Towards the end of that first afternoon, there having been little else just then to divert him, he had decided upon taking a walk and started off across the wooded fields more

or less in the direction of the Dunns' house, although with no particular intention of trying to reach it. He had gone about one leisurely mile and was on the point of turning back when something at the crest of a small hill before him drew his attention. From where he stood, in a small depression of ground some hundred yards distant from the hill, a fair apple tree that grew near the top, its twisted branches here and there bent nearly to the earth, screened his view of the late sun, whose single rays alone listed with crazy serenity at countless angles through the breaks in foliage and branch, so that it seemed a source itself of complex light. This it was that first attracted his glance, and then he made out, or thought he did, a figure leaning up against its trunk. He watched until the figure waved its hand in such a way as to make Lundrigan feel that it had recognized him and would have him now draw near. He obeyed. The figure turned out to be Peter Cowley.

Sara noticed with some irritation as Lundrigan spoke that he seemed far more interested in relating why, as he imagined it, Cowley had confided in—of all people—him, than in elaborating on what exactly had been the nature of that confidence. He had seemed, Lundrigan said, so overwhelmed by his recent encounter, whatever its nature, that he would undoubtedly have entrusted some part of its splendor to the occasional birds, or to the tree itself even, had he, Lundrigan, not happened by. For surely, he went on, Cowley would not otherwise have singled him out for that distinction. They were scarcely two of a kind. It was simply that Cowley had had to tell someone. But what had he told? Though they all

knew in general, they pressed Lundrigan to phrase it for them once more. He declined.

Lundrigan had often laughed at Cowley; he had ridiculed his ways with the children, ways that Lundrigan felt only encouraged them to remain complacently immature; he had scoffed at his outmoded morality; he had said that there was something sinister about virgins over thirty-five; but he nevertheless declined now, and with only a glint of humor in his eyes and at the corners of his mouth, to answer their question. And thus it became necessary for Sara, whose need was greatest, to make a bargain. If he would tell her exactly what Cowley had said, she, in turn, would not merely tell but would in fact show to them all a major secret of her own. Julie McMoon urged his acceptance on this basis; and Sam himself, knowing her secret, said that Sara would have just enough time before dinner to fulfill her part of the agreement should Lundrigan agree, and then, after a little more persuasion, agree he did. He recounted as fully as he could all that Cowley had said to him late in the afternoon two days before of what had appeared beneath the apple tree. It was indeed disappointingly little more than they had already known, and a brief pause followed it. Then Sara proceeded to do as she had promised.

Laughing at them from time to time, and at herself, not heeding their occasional suggestions and chatter, she led them out of the living-room, through zodiacs of firefly across a garden, along a corridor that smelled of old linen, and into her studio. Through the skylight a story and a half above them, the light of an ellipse of moon descended suggestively

upon the large and littered room. A marble girl, her head down, knelt beneath a window with her hair spread out to dry before her. The torso of a goddess, its lower portions swathed in dirty canvas, partially concealed a granite cockerel. Over the arms and back of a chair in the center of the room, more canvas fell, and here the floor was white with crumbled plaster, there dark and shining where shellac was spilled. Julie McMoon bent down to the satyr and ran her finger along its profile: the brow, the nose, the upper lip and mouth, the little sweep of jaw. Sam, with his glass protruding from his breast pocket, stood with Sara at the far wall of her studio; Lundrigan surveyed the scene from the door.

Where or what, they asked, might her secret be; to which Julie slowly replied that certainly it must be, why, *this*, the studio itself by moonlight, that she had had in mind. And yet it was not. By pushing aside a screen that stood against the back wall, by locating an iron ring that appeared to be no more than part of the row of clothes hooks the screen had concealed, and by directing the efforts of Sam and then Lundrigan, whom she had enlisted to tug at the ring until the portion of wall beneath it started noisily and with difficulty to open forward like the ramp of a ship, Sara revealed to them a narrow stairway which would lead them down at last, she said, to the secret they had been promised. The dark entrance was baffled by a fine dust that had been set in motion by their labors with the door and that traveled slowly upward now as Sara led the way.

The room to which they descended was said to have originally been, as Sam explained, a smuggler's cache. It had

been carved or blasted out of soft gray stone and was easily large enough to accommodate fifteen people or, as had been once perhaps the case, as many good-sized kegs of rum. In view of the function it had been thus destined to fulfill, the stone walls seemed finished with surprising care and precision, yet it was the ceiling that gave rise to most astonishment. It had been cross-vaulted with considerable skill, and where the groins met there was even the Gothic medallion of a small six-petaled flower chipped in the same stone. It was a common theory, and the one Samuel Dunn chose now to present his guests, that one of the smugglers had been in his younger and less enterprising days, somewhere in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, a stonemason for a firm specializing in the erection of mausolea, and that he had dedicated this superfluous but happy embellishment to the memory of his lost vocation. And there was also the theory that the room had no connection with smugglers at all; that it had been simply built by a family of Catholics, the house's original owners, who had wished, in the midst of the Protestant community, to conduct their worship in subterranean privacy.

At any rate, the room was Sara's secret. What little light came in through narrow slits of thick glass near the top of the side walls was insufficient to afford their adequate inspection, and Sara was obliged to supplement it with a flashlight which she directed here and there upon the cool surface of the stone. In the day-time, she told them, it was quite bright enough to work in since the slits opened without into a low glass frame which had been used once to protect trans-

planted seedlings, and, though the frame had long ago fallen into disuse, the sun still shone brightly there in the afternoon. It was, of course, in terms of what she had smiled to call her "work" that the room, her secret, was, for her, significant. It was there that she could hide from the children, and from Cowley too, whatever she felt should be hidden; for neither knew even of the room's existence. She looked now with delight upon the vacant walls and floor as though already the shadows of her wizardry fell upon them.

The others, less gifted than she in their expectations, were barely able to conceal their sense of disappointment behind what Sara was pleased to consider the kind of awe the room produced upon them. For them, Sara's room was empty only, vastly so; and to their minds and eyes, still richly cluttered with what they had drunk, said, and seen above, this was oppressive. Whether for this, some other reason, or for none at all, Sam too stood silently with them and, for what seemed the first time, bore no trace of a smile about his eyes or mouth. Did he ordinarily smile so often, Lundrigan wondered, because his face became so tragic in repose? It was Julie Mc-Moon who said that she was starved for dinner; and Lundrigan who led the way stealthily to the dining-room, hissing reassurances from behind corners, ducking from time to time into the shadows and then beckoning the others to follow, as if they were smugglers effecting their escape.

After dinner, when they had returned to the living-room, and Sam, suddenly deciding that the air was too warm and the light too harsh, had extinguished all the lamps but one

and opened the french windows wide to admit whatever night breeze there happened to be, the conversation turned again to Peter Cowley's vision, but, as before, they discovered that even by pooling their individual knowledge of it, they could still not amass enough to sustain the subject for more than a few minutes, and hence turned instead to the larger question of Cowley's nature in general. But here again their talk did not last long, for Sam, who, as his cousin, might have been expected to say most, said least and thereby restrained Lundrigan, who felt that his host's diffidence was proof enough that he considered the discussion an indecorous one, from pursuing, as he would otherwise, and had elsewhere, done, the whole matter of emotional instability, a topic much favored by him in almost any context. Sara did little beyond protesting that she had never had reason to think of Peter as anything but a quiet, pleasant young man, much devoted to his profession as a teacher, but certainly never wild-eyed about it, nor about anything, she insisted, fixing the flower she wore in her black hair more firmly, certainly not a mystic or a visionary or whatever such people were called; and that probably, if an explanation for this extraordinary thing was to be found at all, it would be in the influence upon him of this minister whom he had befriended, this Dr. Lavender whom he was in the city right now to see.

"Visions are funny," Julie said after a pause. She sat deep in the sofa with her freckled face pale against the dark background, her voice slow and almost querulous, but faintly amused too, as though she were telling a joke of which she was not certain. "I nearly had one myself once. There was a

girl I knew at school—quite well, the way you do at school. Awful . . .” She drew the word out to a great length. “She was very fat and popular and for some reason picked me out as the person she always told all about herself to—what it was like to be terribly in love, or terribly scared or . . .”

“Terribly popular,” Lundrigan suggested.

“Yes. And then one vacation she died—I forget why—and you know for weeks afterwards I was sure she was going to come thumping up the stairs to tell me what it was like to be . . . terribly dead. And I even used to kind of hope she would. I’d sit there concentrating on her, trying to pretend I could see her, and then all of a sudden I’d be petrified that I really might. She was the fattest girl you’ve ever seen. So maybe that’s the kind of thing that’s happened to Peter. . . .”

Lundrigan laughed, Sara shrugged her shoulders as if this might perhaps be the answer, and then they were all silent for a time and sat there unmoving in the dim light of the room until Sam spoke.

“I don’t know Peter very well,” he said, fingering the arm of his chair, “because our two families were never close. His mother made what was looked upon then as a rather unsuitable match—nice enough fellow, you know, but, if you’ll pardon the expression,” he smiled broadly, “‘in trade,’ a phrase in vogue during that era. I don’t know Peter as well as I should,” he repeated, “but I never had reason to think of him as unusual, at least not in this most original fashion. I noticed only that he spoke extraordinarily little, and although that in itself is not so unusual—except perhaps for a Dunn—I’ve also noticed that when he does speak, and oc-

casionally he will, what he says is not, as with most silent people, particularly interesting. So if I were forced to pick out *something* unusual about him, I would say only that he tends to be a little . . . tedious, a little . . . ”

“Oh but I don’t agree!” Sara exclaimed. “He’s just very sincere, and how tedious of you not to like him for it.”

“Oh but I do,” Sam mildly protested. “I only said that his rare conversational thrusts don’t happen to keep me on the edge of my seat. I’m very fond of Peter.”

“Well. Luggindran’s not.” Julie pointed her finger accusingly through the haze of her cigarette. “Luggindran *hates* anybody who’s not as bright as he is, and he thinks Peter’s not very bright at all.”

“I said no such thing, you idiot.” Lundrigan tried almost successfully to match the obscure levity of Julie’s rebuke.

“Did!” she replied.

“Didn’t.”

“Lundrigan!” Sara interrupted them, “go play something on the piano,” and this seemed so timely a solution to the slow, summer evening that Lundrigan was quick to accede.

A gold ring set with a small diamond shared the enthusiasm of his right hand as it spread here and there across the keys, and he played adeptly, with a clipped boisterousness that clearly delighted him, while Sara and Sam stood behind him, and he winked through the melody at Julie, who knelt now with her chin on the back of the sofa, watching them. Although Sara’s singing voice was surprisingly high and shrill, Sam’s an uncertain baritone, he listened to them with a curious pleasure at realizing that they sang, after all, only

because he played, would stop when he stopped, and were thus, for as long as the song lasted, his to command. He went even so far as to increase the tempo to hear them hurry after it, and then to play it far too slowly so that they were obliged to do the same, and the obedience with which they followed him in both cases made him laugh aloud as he joined in the song himself.

It was an Irish ballad of infinite pathos, and Sam held his glass high as he sang it, mocking the tremulous melancholy which Lundrigan himself exaggerated with many a flourish, and Sara, engagingly undone, damply blinked from time to time her soft, dark eyes. Towards the end, Julie also entered in with her rather cracked contralto and, when it was over, cried out for another.

“Do you remember this?” Lundrigan exclaimed and played a few introductory bars. She remembered it indeed, for, in the past, it had amounted to a kind of anthem for them, for herself, her husband, for Lundrigan, and he played it now with painful, rending stress—a tortuous burlesque.

“*Leeeaning, leeeaning,*

Leeeaning on the Er-er-las-ting Cross . . .” and then they repeated it with, as part of the original rite, the substitution of “crutch” for “cross” whereupon Julie, joining the others at the piano, urged Lundrigan to continue with more from this same period. And so he did, supported by all three of their voices, as an occasional breeze fluttered the curtains and light from the one remaining lamp softened their faces, while, in darkened bedrooms, out of hearing, the summer night lay deep across the puzzled loins of children.

Chapter Four

“I CAN remember when I was five,” said Harry Fogg. “I was playing outside when I saw an old, sick robin hopping around the grass with his wings dragging. There was something terribly disgusting and unclean about him.” He paused here and pulled his legs out from under the sheets. He peered through the darkness in the direction of Rufus Este’s bed across the room from his and could just make out the dimmest point of highlight on his friend’s glasses. “I wanted to kill him,” he continued. “I can remember going to my father’s desk and finding a long brown-paper business envelope that I took and followed him with for a good two hours or so, I guess, until I finally caught him underneath a tree. Then I squeezed him to death with the envelope, like a great, fat, sick bug.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Rufus Este through the darkness.

“Isn’t that horrible?” said Harry.

“Oh, it *is*,” answered Rufus with intensity. “Especially the part about its being like a bug.”

“Yes.” There was a long silence.

"I was just about the same age," Rufus began, timorously, as though fearing that Harry might have fallen asleep, "when my first horrible thing happened to me."

"What?" asked Harry with profound and reassuring attention.

"I was taking a walk with my nurse," Rufus answered, "and it must have been early in the spring because there had been a frost the night before. We were going down a long path with a hedge on both sides of it—there used to be flowers in the hedge, but it was too early for them then—and I remember thinking what a good time I was having. Then I saw a robin's egg on the path in front of me. I'd never had one before, and I thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. So I picked it up in my hand, and there on the other side, sticking through the shell, was the tiny leg of the bird, frozen as stiff as a wire."

"Oh Rufus, how awful!" said Harry. His bed was by the window, and he moved to the foot of it now so that the moonlight fell faintly on him. His face was harlequined with patches of some white cream he used for his complexion.

"It's funny," said Rufus Este, "that they should both be about birds."

"My Lord, isn't it! I never thought of that."

It was seldom that they ever merely agreed with one another, the two of them; for they consistently protested their acquiescence with a conviction so far more vibrant than the situation would seem to require that it was as if each strove always to reconfirm to the other the great *general* depth of sympathy that existed between them. A good deal of this

was conveyed simply by the tone of their voices whenever they spoke together. They both employed then, as though through little button-sized mouths, the low, indulgent tones of the sick-room almost, of small creatures huddled together in a poignance of resignation to almost certain catastrophe. And when they were silent, it was no ordinary silence.

"It's funny too," said Harry at last, "that they should both be so ugly."

"That *we* should be, you mean," said Rufus.

"You know," exclaimed Harry, "we *are*."

"Killing a robin with an envelope . . ."

"Finding a dead-legged egg . . ."

"Oh, oh, oh . . ." Rufus Este stifled his face with a pillow. Harry Fogg pulled the sheets over his head. The night adjusted itself darkly to the smothered report of their mirth.

"Oh I hate," said Harry with fierce and sudden seriousness, "hate to laugh so hard. It gets to be so much like really crying. We *should* be crying."

"Yes. You know, we should," said Rufus.

"Yes," said Harry.

"And it does improve the style," said Rufus, whose voice came queerly through the darkness.

"Oh it does. Oh Rufus, goodness gracious me, I'm really crying now, I think."

"Oh, so am I."

"What fools we are."

"Not fools."

"What then?"

"I don't know," answered Rufus. "But look—I don't know

why I say it now—but if there's another war, as all the dull, awfully *right* people say there'll be, we must have a plan, Harry. I'm serious."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean we mustn't lose each other then. Say we're left alive."

"We'll meet somewhere."

"But where?" asked Rufus.

"Well, almost everything will be destroyed, they say. We'll have to look for something big that won't be. Some great lake or mountain."

"And we'll each manage to get there somehow when it's all over. Even though it may be a long, long way to walk. I'll bring some music . . ."

"And some books," added Harry. "I can see us now, living in a cave with books and music, the only two alive."

"Like two halves of a broken plate," said Rufus.

"Good, good!" said Harry. "An ugly plate broken down the middle."

"That's us," said Rufus. "An ugly plate."

"That's us," exclaimed Harry, "the *U'glies!*"

"The *Uglies?*"

"The *Uglies!*"

"Oh, oh, oh, oh . . ." they said. "The *Uglies* . . ."

"*Uglies* always reveal their true identity in the dark," said Harry.

"Why?" asked Rufus. "What happens to *Uglies* in the dark?"

"They are usually afraid," said Harry. "Because the dark is lonely."

"And it's lonely," said Rufus, "because there have never been more than two Uglies at once."

"That's right. Seldom have there been more than one."

"But there have always *been* Uglies," said Rufus.

"Oh yes," answered Harry. "Since the very beginning. Uglies go back as far as people."

"But Uglies do not often like people," said Rufus.

"Yet people often like Uglies," said Harry.

"In fact, people sometimes *love* Uglies," said Rufus. "Daisy, for instance, said she did."

"Yes," said Harry, "but people never fall in love with Uglies."

"Uglies fall in love with people though."

"When an Ugly falls in love with a Person," said Harry, "a Person goes away."

"Uglies are so *lonely*," said Rufus. "An Ugly is an island. So is a person."

"But two Uglies are an island whereas two people are *two* islands. That's the difference."

And they continued in this manner for a little, the Uglies, unable to see each other through the press of night, establishing the foundations of their lore. As always, they laughed a great deal, though not particularly at what they said. This was the source of a mistake frequently made about them. People seldom laughed with the Uglies, the children almost never did, and it was consequently reckoned that they them-

selves must laugh since they, if no one else, considered what they said amusing. Yet the Uglies never laughed at what they talked about; instead, they merely talked as an excuse for laughter or, on occasion, tears, never stopping to wonder at what others might make of it. And when they laughed, their laughter came from deep within them, and seemed almost to cause them hurt. It was a 'urious game they played.

Chapter Five

ON THE Fourth of July there were no classes; and the children, who had awakened to a slow, gray rain, watched all morning with billowing excitement as, gradually, the sun hove through depths of cloud, and the day cleared. At noon, by which time the sky was faultlessly blue, Cowley returned from the city in radiant good humor and made his announcement. He would take them to the circus after lunch. It was more, far more, than they had dared hope. They had all known that there was to be a picnic supper that evening on the beach that lay near the circus grounds and afforded an unbroken view of the fireworks that were set off there each summer, but there had been no intimations from any one that there would be an earlier visit to the circus itself. It came as a very special gift then, and though the greatest sum of their gratitude went to Cowley for having initiated the suggestion, the Dunns also fell heirs to a portion of it, and all grudges were with boundless magnanimity forgotten.

The little McMoons, who lived at home rather than with the others in an obscure rear wing of the Dunns' house, were

of course included in the treat, and Cowley took all seven of them by station wagon to the realization of their most jubilant dream. The Dunns, Julie McMoon, Lundrigan, all of them in fact, would arrive later for the picnic and the fireworks. The day was as warm and bright as the one before, and once they had arrived, Harry Fogg and Rufus Este, being older, were allowed to go their own way through it, leaving Cowley and the others to view the animals.

It was more of a large carnival than a circus since the central attraction was not the performance itself, which came somewhat later in the afternoon, but, rather, the wealth of lesser tents and booths that swarmed across the broad field, brilliant and noisy beneath a hot sun. The attendants and barkers with rapid, ribboned canes and hats of straw, variously compelled, like diverse states of conscience in a religious allegory, the crowds that passed and re-passed before them, raising with their countless feet a fine golden dust that spun the very air itself into a minor bargain of the rich and strange. What the lopsided ovals of a score of mouths and the acrobatics of as many arms failed to blare and posture forth, the posters exploited in the yellow, blue and red of toys so that the Uglies, all spun sugar and faintly hysterical with voice-cracking confusion, could decide at first upon no single tent. With little cries of indecision, they allowed the whim of groups in flux to press them here and there up to and past the promise of freaks, or of prizes, confection and mystery, feats of astonishing daring and skill, or laughter like thunder, beauty as fierce and available as the end of the world, all

alive and cluttered against gaping canvas, drunk with the tunes of canes.

Before a tent marked *Chez Paris* in gold, the erratic hand of a child carried atop its father's shoulders disheveled Rufus Este's dark red hair like so many dark red feathers, and Harry Fogg thrust his way beside him as a cymbal crashed and a phonograph was set in motion. Against a background of *Put Your Arms Around Me*, a blonde girl in a pink kimono minced out through a canvas flap to stand upon the platform, squinting slightly at the brightness of day, yet smiling, with her arms outstretched in a nonchalance of supplication while the crowd was promised five more, count them, like her, for a fee that was nothing so much as laughable. She paid no heed to this, the moustached voice that published, loud above the alien din, her beauty and renown. She responded to no single cried or gestured impropriety from the throng before her, but let one fair and general smile suffice. Her hands and wrists alone acknowledged the music; yet at a motion from the manager, at which the phonograph was turned up thrice as loud, the cymbal struck once more, she drew back the folds of her kimono with the fervor and will of an infidel at the curtains of a crèche, then fired at them, with a little cry of almost pain, the mortar of her sequin-baffled thighs, and fled back through the tent flap to the final plea of the moustache, the ticket seller's doxology.

The rapidity and ease with which entrance was made possible was the ultimate lure, and in a few moments the tent was filled, the Uglies seated near the back, the air pungent

with perspiration, sawdust, and, from somewhere, a sweetness. A short blue curtain was rolled up, and the blonde girl together with only one of her promised five companions danced out so nearly naked that the occasional spangles seemed no more than glistening evidence of exertion as they flung themselves this way and that to the lilt of the phonograph and tympani of feet. Their step was exhaustingly simple, consisting of several small leaps to one side, then to the other, and required, throughout, the undiminished shaking of their youth and candor. A thick pole sprouting through the shallow stage to hold the tent erect was used by them to simulate the puissant goal of their desire; and in the soft vice of their knees and arms, like children crazed in a May dance, they assaulted and fatigued it to the cries of the audience which they answered breathlessly from time to time with the shrill, implausible obscenity of girls. Like frightened girls down corridors of misadventure, their bare feet padded with a gentle panic as they danced.

It was the blonde girl who had appeared earlier, more than her darker companion, that possessed the tent. The great majority of the screams were for her, for the powdered, shell-like curve at the small of her back, the passion of her lucid gestures; she was the object of the maddest pleas and most fabulous suggestions, and yet there was a kind of triumphant decorum in her near nudity as though revealed beneath a nightgown of starched linen billowed timorously by the chance of moonless wind in dark, heroic rooms. Almost it was possible, through all that tumult, to love the blonde girl, to love her dearer than God, and Harry Fogg choked on this,

his thought, and nodded through the hubbub towards a lean man with his face thrust forward as immobile and imminent as a weapon. The Uglies screamed with laughter at this, and at themselves, but their mirth was no wilder than the other screams about them, and they were able to escape once more, unnoticed, into the day.

Near the freak tent a yellow cat lay dry-toothed and mysteriously dead among a scattering of spun sugar. It was part of the Uglies' tradition, when passing by such a thing, never to keep themselves from looking at it or, having looked at it, never to pretend that they had not. It was never one of their niceties to proceed, in general, as though it were the sensible, well-kept sidewalk that mattered and not the abomination upon it; as though the paralytic's patient eye had no connection at all with his braced and awkward leg. When confronted with something broken, helpless, hideous or, as now, with something dead, there was no looking vaguely away, no furtive stare and pretense then of blindness, but, rather, the direct inspection, the articulated observation. Often these matters were made articulate only with the aid of considerable laughter and laughter that was almost certainly misunderstood by any who might perceive it. Recognizing all this, they hesitated at the entrance to the freak tent.

"I can't get over that business back there," said Harry softly, glancing away from the placard portraying a woman in evening dress with no head but only a medusa of tubes curving from her neck into an elaborate machine at her side. "The blonde girl, I mean . . ."

“You old comic!” Rufus looked at the large eye and timid chin of his friend’s profile turned, as it was, towards the tent where they had been. His dun hair, parted, like Rufus’s, in the middle, fell in two frayed crescents on his forehead. His nose tilted slightly upwards at its tip; his lips were full but firm. It was the head of a child on the body of a man, as constant a source of mild amusement to Rufus as was Rufus himself, his never-closed mouth, his small brown eyes and smudge of eyebrow, to Harry. Rufus laughed at his friend.

“You’ll turn into a dirty old man some day, just wait,” he warned. “The blonde girl, my foot! I’ll bet she hasn’t had a bath for a week, and at least two dozen occasions for one.”

“No, really . . .” protested Harry. “You’re wrong, you know.” Whatever he looked at out somewhere in the crowd seemed almost to have mesmerized him, and the effort with which he turned once more towards Rufus was visible in his expression.

“Nonsense,” said Rufus, taking him by the arm and pulling him gently forward with what passed for a smile, “come along. Forget her. In here is where you belong anyway.” It was apparent to them both that this was as near as Uglies could ever come to hating each other, and they were as aghast to recognize the hate as they were relieved to discover its limits. They entered the tent.

Behind a counter a short man in a straw hat, talking all the time with the dexterous speed of salaried disinterest, flirted through the ruddy light of sun on canvas a large bottle containing a two-headed human embryo. He held it shoulder high for a moment, tipped it backward that the sex

of the thing within be apparent to all, and then made it bob this way and that, before ducking it behind the counter again, so that the flickering high-light on the smooth flank of the bottle seemed a wildly living organism trapped there inside by fearful error. It was only a step from here to the fire-eater across the aisle.

Surely there was a splendor about him that defied even the panegyrics of his exhibitor. A well-built Negro of middle-age, he stood in yellow tights trussed with faded vermillion and wore a face of such incredible ugliness that it was difficult to believe that he could possess any other gift that better justified his being so displayed between a bearded lady and two midgets. And yet he did. From a punch bowl of gasoline he dipped a cupful which he poured between his scarred lips and, at an exclamation from his friend, tossed back his head so that the hair hung in countless brilliantined hooks while with the proffered taper he set fire to the contents of his mouth. The flames craned high for the glory of a few moments whereupon he gave a great puff of breath, clapped his hand to his mouth, bowed and, with his lips still covered, stepped to the rear of the platform as his manager stepped forward with postcards commemorating his skill. In the background he could be seen kneeling beside a bucket into which, his head bowed, he was gently vomiting. In another moment he had returned for a final bow in no way wearied, as one might have expected, by the brilliance of his exertion, but as though renewed in spirit as well as strength, purged of all but success, his black face glistening and valiant like a relic of victory.

"But how come his mouth isn't all burned?" asked George

Bundle, who, along with the other children, was being jostled by spectators as they progressed to the next platform where a midget and his wife sat at either side of a small dais on which they would presently do a tap-dance. Cowley had entered with his charges during the fire-eater's performance and had remained through it undetected by Harry Fogg and Rufus Este, who stood only a few heads to their front.

"Why man!" answered Peter Cowley, "don't you go worrying about that." Even obliged as he was to bend over slightly so that he could keep one hand on George Bundle's shoulder, the other on Daisy McMoon's, in an effort to hold his little group together as they followed in the direction of the midgets, he was still somewhat taller than most about him, and his familiar light brown hair and blue eyes would have been immediately apparent to the Uglies had either of them thought to turn around. They did not, however, nor could he allow his own glance to err from the children long enough to come upon them. Fendall Dunn caught sight of the suggestively emblazoned counter from behind which the two-headed mistake of, as it was inscribed there, nature was intermittently displayed, hissed his discovery into the ear of Timmy McMoon, and would have encouraged him to a closer view had Cowley not intervened; Ellie Sonntag had to be reminded that the fire-eater's performance was completed, so involved had she become with the sight of him seated upon a barrel at the rear of his platform, his hands hanging loose between his vermillion knees, his eyes closed and his mouth half open, waiting until he should be called forward once more. It was only with considerable attention

to his task that Cowley managed to keep all five of them with him.

"Let's stay here now and watch these little folks put on their show," he said at last, and so they stood there while the tiny man and woman, with many a grimace and singing a cryptic song, performed their dance.

It could scarcely be said that Peter followed his own exhortation; for with his arms hanging at full length before him, his fingertips just touching, and his head and shoulders inclined very slightly forward, it was clear that his glance was directed at somewhat too low an angle to permit him a view of the performance. If there was any resemblance at all between himself and his cousin Dunn, it was perhaps a certain immobility about the face that tended to give especial prominence to whatever change of expression might transpire there; and at this moment the faintest, penumbrate frown tentative upon his forehead assumed an intensity which would have been almost entirely overshadowed by the various counter-expressions that would have accompanied it upon a more mobile countenance, Lundrigan's for instance.

Holy and merciful Father to whose name be all glory and honor now and forever, accept a heart's thanksgiving for thy most gracious gift of life and for that blessed suspicion of thy merciful concern for all men, especially those who have sinned, which sustains an imperfect human faith. He had been a simpleton, he thought, worse perhaps, to have brought them here, the children.

Like antique children, venerated surely among their kind, the small and married dancers whirled now in a waltz as a

giant in a ten-gallon hat and fringed leather shirt made a circle, encompassing but never touching them, with his arms.

It was because, upon his return from the city, he had been moved by the sight again of the earth's summer, the sweet and heavy green of the countryside, the opalescence of fields mowed and scorched to palest pink with souvenirs of green showing faintly beneath, and, at last, by the excitement of the children themselves, alive to any joyous possibility, that he had been carried quite away and had found himself unable to consider anything, even the freak tent, as less than equally poignant and beautiful. He had remembered too a game the children played, a game called Statues, in which someone twirled you around and around by the arms and then released you suddenly to go flying off to the ground where, statuewise, you tried your best to maintain with perfect immobility whatever the position into which you had fallen. The more violent or grotesque your position, the more difficult, of course, the labor of maintaining it, and the purer your pride if you succeeded, and the greater the delight of the other players who watched. And so it would be, Cowley had thought, with the fat lady and the India rubber man, the pinheads and the giant, who, with their deformities and the apparent ease with which they bore them, would seem to the children merely to be playing with greater skill and happier success a game very like their own. For Cowley himself the image had gone further still. It was possible for him to imagine the freaks too as having been flung forward once, albeit by a graver hand, as part of an older ritual, to flounder earthwards and be at last confronted with an even more

inescapable obligation than the children's of holding the attitude, however extreme, into which they had fallen. To the unfaithful alone, he had thought, would theirs seem a crueler sport, for it was only the faithless who did not recognize that the more painful the effort, the sweeter the success, the fairer the reward. Yet all this had faded for him when, upon leading the children through the tent flap, he had come upon the fact itself of, if not the ugliness, the ugly isolation of these creatures from one another; from a dissident humanity; from all, like life itself, that was beautiful; and thus, for Cowley, from all that was godly too. His fingertips touching, leaning slightly forward, he prayed in silence, as the midgets concluded their dance, for a variety of forgiveness.

"Jesus," said Fendall Dunn with unconscious vehemence, "did they ever *slink!*!" Several of the nearest members of the crowd, noticing that the midgets seemed by their sudden indifference to all but this little group of children and their guide to have overheard the boy's remark, turned from their progress onward, laughed and nudged each other expectantly.

"Fendall Dunn!" said Ellie Sonntag with an awed intake of breath. Cowley was on the point of leading them out of the tent altogether when the indignant voice of the male midget, urged forward by his partner, made such escape impossible.

"What's the trouble, Pops," he cried in a husky falsetto to Cowley, "Junior don't like the show?" He stepped to the front of the dais thrusting his wife behind him as though to protect her from the further insult which he pretended, courting the crowd's sympathy, to expect from the tall man whom he was able to look ludicrously down upon from the

height of the platform. The unopened bud of his face bloomed to a man's anger belied with unnecessarily low comedy by his child's body. "Not enough skin for him maybe?"

Cowley, flushing, stood with his hand on Fendall's shoulder. Three or four more spectators stopped to view the spectacle. Fendall remained round-eyed and unmoving, promising at any moment to break into tears. The other children giggled uneasily as the midget gave a nasal grunt of interrogation to italicize his unanswered taunt and took one more step towards them. They drew back as though fearing that he might fall or leap down upon them like an unfriendly gnome in a fairy tale; and there seemed almost a greater fear than this in their eyes, as they directed their gaze along with the midget's towards Peter, that he would fail them in the terror of their crisis and leave to them the responsibility of replying. Daisy touched his hand as if to awaken him.

"I'm very sorry," he said, his voice indistinct and deep. Instead of acknowledging him, the freak, recognizing the general disinterest now of his dwindling audience, pivoted derisively on his tiny heel and left the scene. His wife, a broad blue sash lettered in silver with "Oh you kid" swelling from her décolletage to her waist, picked up her skirt and followed him. Fendall Dunn started to cry.

Although his companions were well accustomed to the quick displays of his grief or distemper, tears are contagious among children, and it was clear that Daisy at least, who had been terrified throughout the episode at the thought of the giant's possible intervention in behalf of his small friends, or Ellie, who wore the humiliation of it like a shroud, might

have joined him in the extravagance of his despair had not Cowley drawn their attention elsewhere by leading them now towards the exit. It was when they reached the daylight again and Cowley stood facing the five of them for a moment that he had said to them, "That sure was awful, wasn't it," and had accompanied his words with the faintest grimace of comic helplessness that was nevertheless evident enough to be caught at gratefully by the children, who had had to laugh through what was almost their tears to see him standing there and looking at them in such a very funny way. And it was only then, and under cover of their mirth, that he had said privately to Fendall, who no longer wept, that he must never again speak so unkindly of any man.

The Uglies, witnesses to the entire altercation, had followed them out of the tent and joined their laughter there as they would otherwise have shunned with subterfuge what might have been the injured silence and the tawdry wreckage of so bright a day. And together, all seven of them, past *Chez Paris*, past myriad booths where rings were tossed, balls thrown or darts, guns fired, levers pulled, to win, for the fortunate, galleons of blue plaster tapered to orange glistening as in a dream with finest silver dust, or gold-haired dolls with eyes as blue as sky, man-made flowers promised to shine like love in the dark, together they walked, Peter, the children, the Uglies, to the largest tent of all, to the grandstand within the tent, where shortly the circus itself began.

To the amusement of none and the reconciliation of all, while the calliope played to divert the audience as the girl who had swung from a rope by her teeth was lowered once

more to the sawdust and a man all debonair in spangles approached the overwhelming fact of a cannon, Rufus Este told how the legless and armless lady had bitten her fingernails quite to the quick out of pique at Fendall's critique of the midgets; and Harry Fogg went farther to report, although to Rufus alone, that he had heard her interrupt a single, indulgent spectator trying to discuss the weather with her to say that it was tough, as she put it, awful tough, getting up and down stairs. With a muffled explosion and an expectant roar from the grandstands, the spangled man was shot from the cannon into a net, where he bounced twice and then fell to his feet on the ground, tossed back his long hair with a quick nod of his head and, bowing, extended his right arm to accept the acclaim due him. Even Timmy McMoon, who as a rule avoided enthusiasm in general, and George Bundle the taciturn, were vociferously appreciative; and though, at twelve and eleven, they were too old now to say that this was what they wanted to be when they grew up, the very effort with which they clearly did not say it, scoffing a little at Daisy's undisguised delight, made their ambition only the more explicit.

"I expect," said Cowley, leaning across Ellie so that they could hear him above the general din, "that really takes courage."

"Oh yes!" said George Bundle.

"Yes," said Timmy McMoon. "Not *too* much though."

"Just too much for me, I guess," said Cowley.

"Too much for them too," said Ellie, "if they'd only admit it."

"You can never tell, Ellie," Cowley answered. His laugh was accepted by both sides as vindication of their own claims.

"Well, I know *I'd* never do it," concluded Ellie.

"Neither would I," agreed Fendall, and this curious alliance surprised them both into silence.

It was towards the end of the performance, as the calliope played *Over the Wares* and the elephants rotated ponderously on their overturned tubs, that Cowley, filled with an emotion like great grief or great happiness but richer than either, gave unspoken thanks for a life of which his only fear was that he loved it perhaps too dearly.

Chapter Six

AFTER their picnic by the water and before it was dark enough for the fireworks, there was a pause during which even the children were quieter than at any other time that day. The sun had set vividly, leaving the placid ocean and its length of beach to a dusk of swarming, granular blue so dense that it seemed to obstruct all clarity not only of vision but also of sound. The lisp of the gently ebbing sea, the sheen of the sand, and the conversation of those gathered there were alike dimmed and confused by the buzzing silence of the summer evening.

Most of those who had come to see the display, many of whom, like Cowley and the children, had seen the circus earlier that day, were crowded upon a public section of beach several hundred yards distant from the private area which the Dunns and their friends shared with a comparatively small number of spectators who, in their own distinct groups, awaited, like the Dunns themselves, the coming of night. Sam, his legs disposed with regal ease upon the sand still faintly warm from the sun, lay with his back against a canvas support, while Fendall, his head resting in the crotch of his

arm, lay silently curled up beside him, making a little ridge of sand along a fold at the edge of his father's white jacket. In the consuming half-light, the sand seemed pale blue and the white jacket even paler still. Indeed, if you watched them too steadily for long, he found, they began not to be there at all but became simply an indistinguishable part of the dusk. He let the sand trickle along the fold until it had almost reached the sleeve and his father's hand where it lay alien and dark against the beach. For a moment he paused there, and then, with a kind of dazed preoccupation and the precision of an artist, let a tiny stream as from an hourglass sift softly down upon the still fingers. He did not look at his father, but only at his father's hand, which, in this manner, he delicately assaulted.

Although Fendall was unaware of it, Sam watched intently this torpid play of his. The microscopic impact of the sand lulled him like a caress as even through the dwindling light he could make out the glint of the boy's eyes damp with life above the unconscious smile of his lower lids. In his mind, vaguely and with languor, he found himself explaining to the child at graceful length, and as he would never have explained aloud, the difference between an exaggeration and a lie, between the love of son and the love of wife, and on, as it gradually came to him, to all the slow wisdoms of evening and a receding tide.

At the same time, nearer the ocean, where the beach was still wet and alive from the recent sliding forward of a wave, the other children crouched in silent concentration over the building of their fort. To leeward of the sandy walls, the

girls, Daisy and Ellie Sonntag, patted and strengthened from within while, without, Timmy and George Bundle, their shoes off and their arms bare, assisted one another in the construction, with alternate layers of sand and seaweed, of bulwarks designed to hold back an ocean which was in reality ebbing slowly in the other direction. Harry Fogg and Rufus Este, who had pointed out this discrepancy with little effect, contented themselves with what they considered the less futile task of contributing to the elegance rather than to the functionless strength of the structure by allowing wet sand to trickle from their loosely clenched fists down upon the tops of the walls where it piled crazily up into little Victorian gothic pinnacles as heedless of the sea as was the sea of them. And this was a fitting occupation for them, irrelevant, solitary, for their own entertainment alone, disdained by their younger friends, and pursued not in silence, like the others, but talking to one another in whispers lost somewhere in the greater irrelevance, the more profound solitude, of the sound of the waves.

Lost too, or almost so, was the voice of Dick Lundrigan, who sang quietly to Sara and Julie, his head bent low and turned away from them towards the sea.

*"And when Sergeant Death in his cold arms shall embr-a-ace me,
To lull me to sleep with sweet 'Erin Go Bragh' . . ."*

Sara listened with her eyes closed, leaning far back on her elbows, her hands covered with sand.

"Luggindran must be drunk," said Julie with the exag-

gerated solicitude of a parent talking to an injured child. "Otherwise he could never sing so pretty, could you, Lundrigan?"

Lundrigan smiled but paid no further attention, continuing his song.

"By the side of my Kathleen, my young wife, oh pla-ace me . . ."

"Although maybe he's not drunk." Julie looked at him with her expression of being both startled and bemused, a slight, freckled smile about her mouth.

"No," said Sara. "He's just crying, because it's such a sad song—much too sad, Lundrigan. You can see the tears falling off his little chin."

"Then forget Philein Brady, the Bard of Armagh," he concluded with a final, unresolved chord.

"There!" said Julie. "He sang very pretty, even though it was very sad." She used the same soft tones as before but without her earlier traces of mockery, and with visible restraint did no more, as she spoke, than place her hand gently for only a moment upon the knee of her husband's friend, who merely smiled, but the kindest smile, at what she had called the prettiness, the sadness of his song. On the other hand, not loving him, as did Julie, for simply all that his presence alone would always recall to her, not loving him in the least for that matter but only lovingly moved for the moment by his music and by the evening, Sara did not need to conceal the richness of an emotion greater than she wished to be known behind any gesture as slight as Julie's. Instead,

she kissed him full upon the cheek, and in so doing revealed precisely the amount of affection and gratitude she felt without suggesting the presence of more. Had she felt twice as much, one imagined, she would have embraced him twice as many times with twice the fervor, whereas for Julie, the greater her emotion, the less her demonstration of it.

"I love him with a passion all right," said Sara, once she had kissed him. "The only trouble is he cries too damn much."

"What's the matter with you two!" exclaimed Lundrigan, feigning high indignation. "I wasn't crying at all, and those aren't tears on my chin anyway, they're martini."

"Martinis!" Sara clasped her hands before her and threw her head back. "Oh I do so love them, lovely, cold, pale ones that keep pulling the chair away just when you're about to sit down, that make you go all numb around the nose. Dick, are there any left?" There were, and he poured one for her.

"Here's to . . ." She looked about her for something or someone to commemorate. "To . . . Peter," she concluded, seeing him where he squatted on the sand some distance away. "I drink this glass to him."

"But can you," asked Lundrigan, "'can ye drink of the cup that *he* shall drink of?'"

Sara looked at him strangely. "Of any cup," she said. "Of any cup that he shall drink of, I can drink," and she raised the glass to her lips.

"Oh well. That's O.K. then, because after all there are cups and cups . . ." He looked to her for a reply, but for

the moment there was none. "For instance," he continued, experimentally, "a good martini should be better than six to one."

"Oh at least!" said Julie, coming to his assistance. "And pale as . . ."

"As a stomach," said Lundrigan. "And dry. Dry as what?"

"As a laugh maybe," Sara answered, turning to him again. "And strong as suspicion."

"Then they can make the world go round all right," he said, "and round and round and round." He laughed.

"The poor world." Julie looked towards the stars. "I do hope it will keep on being round a little longer. In spite of what everybody says."

"In spite of what *who* says?" asked Lundrigan with sudden annoyance.

"Oh you know," she answered. "Somebody's always said it, haven't they Dick? I mean I do really hope it lasts if only the way a party does when some awful people have already started keeping their eye on the door. I remember somebody said, 'La vie, la vie, we'd be dead without it.' At least I would, and so would you, Luggindran."

"I suppose." There was a pause.

"Imagine la vie ending though," said Sara.

"Not very pleasant," he said in quick acquiescence.

"If only I was in charge," said Julie. "I would say, oh let it go on a little longer, and then, without saying anything to anybody, I'd really let it go on 'much more than just a little.'

"So would I," said Sara.

"Where are the fireworks?" asked Lundrigan.

The evening had passed. One sensed the change not because it was greatly darker, but because of what seemed a change in the texture of the air. The thickness of dusk had given way to the watery clearness of night. Voices appeared to carry farther, and it was cooler. The children left their fort of sand and with instinctive, night-bred need for warmth and companionship came to sit nearer their parents. Harry Fogg and Rufus Este went and stood by Cowley, who for some time had been sitting apart a little from the others where the sand was no longer wet with the sea but still smooth and firm from it. In his hand he held a bit of driftwood with which he had been drawing, the designs still visible by the light of the half-moon. The Uglies leaned over his shoulder to examine them. Rufus Este peered through his glasses and asked him what the central figure was. It was a fish, said Harry Fogg, anyone could see that. And so it was, though Peter Cowley said he feared that anyone could *not* be expected to see it—the crudely drawn side view of a fish with one great eye staring skywards. But what then, asked Harry Fogg this time, was the vertical inscription just beneath it? It was obvious at least, said Rufus Este, that it was something in Greek. Yes, but what? It was Greek for fish, replied Cowley with such simplicity that Rufus Este had to smother a giggle in the sleeve of his green sweater. But why, continued Harry Fogg?

"Oh why indeed!" cried Rufus. "Why, why indeed!!" and

he pushed him over backwards. Harry disliked intensely being pushed even in jest, and although he did not hate his friend for it, he wanted to hurt him, and they struggled together in the sand. Peter Cowley sat back upon his heels, looked up at the moon, and laughed a little.

“Why indeed,” he echoed almost imperceptibly.

The children, attracted by the disturbance, ran over, and then George Bundle saw the picture of the fish with its great and staring eye. Cowley did not see him see it because he was looking up at the moon and laughing a little, and hence he did not see him destroy it. George Bundle went to his knees and destroyed it first with his fists as though he were beating out a furious message on a drum; then he finished destroying it with his feet. Only the word for fish remained, partially obliterated, but still decipherable.

And then, just as one I gly was about to hurt the other, the fireworks began, and there came a momentary hush over all who had gathered there to watch.

High and swift into the night the burning rockets hissed until with a report obscured by distance they burst into triumphing sprays of shattered light, whole new astronomies of fire, and fell then, slowly seaward, bright and soft as snow. But again and yet again with crazed and bawdy zeal to prick the very matrix of the dark, their fellows shot up after them and fathered flame there, dappling, as they sifted down, the upturned faces of the crowd beneath, disappearing at last with the prolonged oh of wonder and delight they had occasioned. It was then that Cowley, who, with Harry and Rufus, had joined the larger group, rose to his feet before

them. The sky behind him still flashed from time to time with the brilliance of rockets, and the great pinwheels down by the water's edge continued to spin with fiery speed, but the initial awe at the spectacle, the spectacle alone divorced from beach and night, half-moon and every star, had come to an end, and they turned now to the suddenly standing figure of Cowley for new diversion. Sara had leaned over to Fendall to push the dark hair back from his forehead, but stopped halfway and let her arm come to rest upon the sand. Sam dropped back on his elbows and crossed his legs before him. Lundrigan, as if someone had called out his name, looked up suddenly.

"Going so soon?" he asked.

In answer Cowley only shook his head, turned for a moment towards the ocean and then spoke.

"Folks," he said, "I've got you all here together now, Dunns, McMoons, the children, all of you—it's been such a good day, the picnic, the beach at night, and the ocean—and if you don't mind, there's something I've been meaning to say to you and that I'd like to say here because the fireworks are almost over now, and yet there are still enough to watch," he looked towards the sky as he spoke, "in case I go on too long. And I don't plan to. You have to stop me if I do."

It was disconcerting not to be able to see his face as he spoke, to guess that he chose this particular moment to speak for the very reason that it could not be seen, standing as he was with his hands clasped in front of him and his back towards the moon. Lundrigan, who suffered at the use of such words as "folks," suggested that he might as well say what-

ever he had to say sitting down, suggested it not rudely but lightly, to which Cowley replied that it must be the school-teacher in him, and crouched down to the sand where he sat on his heels. In the process of doing this, he stepped by accident upon the outstretched hand of Ellie Sonntag, who, in truly painful embarrassment that the humiliation of her plight be discovered, made no attempt to free herself but did what little she could to disguise the awkwardness of her position so near to Cowley into seeming comfortable and of her own free choice.

"I expect you've all heard," he continued, "something about what happened to me a couple of days ago not far from here. I've tried awfully hard since then, since I decided I had to tell you about it, to find some way of describing it to you so you could believe me and wouldn't think I'd gone out of my head, and even though I haven't found a good way yet, I still want to try; I still want to explain it as well as I can." This was to be a revelation, then, of a secret that had been growing stale in its own mystery, and the children forgot even the fireworks in their eagerness to hear.

"Peter," interrupted Julie McMoon, "don't you feel you have to say any more than you want to. It's your business anyway, and nobody's going to *make* you explain." To the relief at least of every child, Lundrigan looked at her and held her finger to his lips.

"Thanks," said Cowley, "very much, but that's not it, I promise you. I'm doing what I want to do." Down by the shore a string of boys fired roman candles into the sky: red, blue, white, green globes of light floating up through the

dark. He shifted his position somewhat, and Ellie Sonntag was able to free her hand. "Look," he said, "there's one thing I've got to clear up right away. I didn't see *God*, you know."

More than one of his listeners had to smile in the shadows at the bizarre bluntness of this declaration, but they stopped smiling when they were able to see past its incongruity to the meaning of what he had said. He had not, by his own admission, seen quite *that*, and they were forced by having it put before them into realizing that somewhere, deep and unexpressed within them, they had variously believed, had even almost hoped, that he had. Perhaps the strongest reaction was Sam's, who recognized that he could no longer look upon his cousin as a gentle lunatic engagingly if misguidedly convinced of having interviewed the Creator, but merely as a rather ridiculously inept figure whose hallucinations, whatever their precise nature, were second-rate. He came close to actually despising Cowley for this, for what he could not help but deem his shabby unsuccess, and deplored the entire scene no less for knowing that he would have had to deplore it outwardly all the more had the declaration of what it was he saw been otherwise.

"I don't think I'll ever really understand," the uncertainty in his voice confirmed him, "just why I was allowed to see anything at all, so you can be sure I know what it must be like for you folks to believe, truly believe, that I really did. But I *was* allowed—how can I make you trust me when I say that?—and I *did* see . . ." He paused for a moment. "But that's the part I can't describe. I wish I could, but it doesn't really matter anyway. You'll see why.

"There were no words between us at the time. At least not what we think of as words. But it was more than just quiet; it was so quiet you could hear every little noise as though it was a big one, the way it is when you hold your breath and can hear the sound of your own heart inside you. The sun was getting low in the sky, but the light was coming through the leaves all around me, it seemed from all directions, and that's when I first began to know what was happening. I remember I kept thinking, Peter Cowley, Peter Cowley, are you dreaming, old Peter? But of course it wasn't that because I wasn't asleep, and I noticed the kind of things around me you don't notice when you're dreaming: I could feel the sun warm on my hand, and there was a fly sitting on a stone beside me rubbing his back legs against his wings the way they do. I was awake all right.

"And it was then I was . . . made sure, for the first time. For the first time in all my life I *knew* that I was right in believing what I'd only hoped I was right in believing before, hoped with all my heart and all my soul—that there *is* God, and that we matter to Him. Very much."

Sara had the impulse to cry. It was partly because there was something in Cowley's voice that made her think he might cry himself, and partly because she felt she must do something as unreal as what he was doing and there seemed to be nothing else. But she looked instead at the pinwheels by the water's edge, noticed the figures of watching men black against their light, and reassured herself that the only unreality was here on this little patch of beach where she was sitting, whence she could escape at any moment if she

wished. And consequently she did not cry, nor indeed did Cowley, whose voice, though deep and sometimes hesitant, was firm.

"I wanted you all to know this as much as I'd have wanted you to know, if I'd been very sick, that I was well again; but, except for one thing, I might never have told you at all because I'd have been afraid that you wouldn't believe me, wouldn't believe that it was true what I learned, and I know you don't believe me now, and of course I don't blame you. But you're going to see for yourselves. So you know why I've brought the whole thing up."

Fendall Dunn dug his fingers deep into the sand and shut his eyes as tightly as he could. Through his ears, however, he could still hear the explosions, sometimes very far and faint, sometimes very near and loud, of strings of Chinese crackers, cherry bombs thrown from the dunes onto the wet sea rocks below, the scary voice of Cow as he continued.

"If you'll let me, and I sure hope that you do, I want to take you all, and Dr. Lavender, my friend that I saw in the city this morning, back to that same little hill because it's not only what I want to do, but what I have to do too. You'll see with me what I saw there, and then you will believe, each one of you, what I believe. It's the best I can do. I think it is the best that I was ever meant to do, and so in three days' time, with Dr. Lavender, who'll be here then, you must go back there with me and see for yourselves."

On the whole, when he had finished speaking, and he finished as abruptly as he had begun, they handled the situa-

tion, all of them, gracefully and well. Lundrigan remained silent, then lit a cigarette and made a little hill of sand in which to plant the match as pennant; but Sara and Julie, Sam himself, were good at drawing Cowley slightly aside and at letting the children know lightly, yet in such a way as not to give offense to Peter, that this little interlude, this not altogether unforeseen part, they inferred, of the evening's entertainment, was over now, and they might run down to the shore and watch the pinwheels sputter themselves out for a few minutes before they were to be taken home and to bed. Even the Uglies, whence, if dissent was to come, it usually came, fell in with this and ran, Rufus's red hair rising and falling with each step he took, towards the ocean. And only then, with the children gone, did they turn to Cowley to speak of what he had said to them. There seemed, basically, but two ways in which to speak of it: either with incredulous laughter or with further inquiry, and Cowley's continued presence forced them to the latter.

Lundrigan had risen and, by the fixed line of his glance towards the horizon, and the preoccupation with which he smoked his cigarette, gave no sign of entering the conversation, so that it was Sam who was the first to speak, to ask, not that he doubted what the answer would be but simply as a way of beginning, if his cousin had been serious in all that he said. And damn it all, if he would excuse her, Sara continued, was he sure that they were *all* to go back there with him in three days? All, that was, said Julie, except the children, because certainly they were a little young, weren't

they? It was enough for them just to have heard him speak this evening, she said, and Daisy for one had been almost shivering with fear and overexcitement.

By moonlight now they could see Cowley's face again and the smile that attested, more than any frown, to his seriousness. It was a rather unremarkable face, bland, slow to change expression, and more or less round in shape by virtue of the almost boyish fullness of the cheeks which became particularly apparent when he smiled and belied his more than thirty years. One wished that he smiled more frequently, for of his relatively narrow range of expressions, this was by far the most successful, involving every feature, whereas the others—annoyance, wonder, grief—seemed so slight as to be scarcely noticeable.

Their questions had come all at once and without intermission so that he was obliged to answer them together. He had, he protested, meant all that he said, and they must, if they would, return with him as he had suggested. Of this he was certain. As for the children, however, he supposed it made less difference there, less difference now; he had never intended to frighten them. It was as he said this that, for the first time since the sun had set, he was filled with a kind of hesitation. In every respect but this he felt confident of having done what had been best for him to do, but Julie McMoon's query reawakened in him memories of the freak tent and all that his young charges had unavoidably, unforeseeably he swore, seen there earlier that day. Had he, in general, he wondered, out of concern for their parents, for Lundrigan, for their need to see what he had seen, believe what he be-

lieved, neglected to consider the gentler needs of such as Daisy McMoon, George Bundle, Timmy, for whom the mildest gesture of the Lord was bound to seem, above all, terrifying and alien? Only, perhaps, after they had at their young leisure wondered slowly at the very immobility of the vast creating palm and shaping fingers, had observed the massive hand lying motionless upon the sand; only then, when they had come to trust the immensity of its stillness, could they perhaps be expected to endure the awful sight of it in motion. So great was Cowley's concern for what might already, he feared, be the irreparable harm of what he had done, that he forgot for the moment to speak and sat there in silence with his interlocutors.

For the first time Lundrigan turned to them from where he stood.

"What the hell," he said, a little unsteadily, "if Peter's so set on this, I say let's go with him the way he wants. Somebody can stick up a sign that says 'For Adults Only,' and then everybody'll be satisfied. That's my idea."

Sara laughed, Julie smiled, Sam patted him on his back, and in the end they all agreed with him. They would go with Cowley back to his little hill on Wednesday, and the children, for fear not only of what they might see but also, more importantly perhaps, of what they might not see, would be kept at home. And the children learned of this before they left the beach, and their wrath was boundless. Just before the Dunns were to drive them away in the station wagon with Julie McMoon, Lundrigan announced that he wanted to go for a swim, and Cowley, to the general surprise, said

that he might go with him. And thus the two of them were left behind when the others departed.

There were still a good many spectators on the public section of beach even though the fireworks were, except for an occasional rocket, largely over, but few remained near them, and after walking down the shore for a short distance, they reached a part that was completely deserted. Leaving Lundrigan floating on his back not far from the shore, Cowley swam straight out for two hundred yards or so with the phosphorus tracing his long arm strokes and kicking feet. He trod water there for a time with his hands making mesmeric circles to either side and his head thrown back, and then dove below the surface. The water was far cooler at that level, and he let it fill his eyes as with slow, broad sweeping of arms he remained there looking down into the immense darkness of the sea. Then with a languorous twist of his entire body, his hands stretched far out before him as if to brush through many veils, he descended deeper still. Just as his ears began to ring with the pressure, his fingers touched against the sandy bottom, and he could hold his breath no longer but let it escape in one gasp and ascended once more, with the great, bright bubbles, to the surface. The second time he dove straight to the bottom, and with the sand touching his bare chest, glided slowly along it. Seaweed brushed his face, and with his hands he could feel little shells and bits of rock. Deep in the submarine night, the water chill and heavy, soft, against his nakedness, he slid along the lightless floor of the ocean finned and gilled with the complete absence of human thought.

When at last he emerged, he found himself in shallower water within a few yards of Lundrigan, and they stood together there up to their shoulders in the sea and obliged occasionally to rise and descend with the preliminary swell of waves before they curled and broke in churning, lime-bright panic on the shore. One hell of an evening all in all, Lundrigan said, and through his fingers pressed to his lips he blew out a thin stream of water as if to show how hellish. His purpose was not to annoy Cowley, but to awaken him to his presence, to the idea of talk even there with the ocean up to their shoulders, for there were things he wished to say, and to Peter alone.

In the publishing house with which he held the position of editor, Lundrigan was quite clearly pleased to be generally recognized as, of all his colleagues, the most *aggressive*. This was their word, but they had derived it from him; like "secure," "insecure," "traumatic," it was the kind of word that he was fond of using himself, that stood, to his mind, for standards in terms of which he felt that he could with accuracy and justice evaluate the behavior of others; nor was he, especially in such an instance as this, averse to having them applied to himself. *Aggressive*, as it happened, was applied to him not only by those for whom it meant a commendable zeal, an outspoken resolve as intolerant of mediocrity, however well-intentioned, as it was indulgent of excellence, however exacting, but also by those to whom it meant nothing so much as a final and pointed disparagement. To them, his detractors, his aggressiveness consisted of an excessive and irritating efficiency, a quickness of mind that seemed

to the older and slower ones, or to the younger and less bold, as annoying as was the quickness of his short, clicking step when he entered their offices on business, or the dry and accurate haste with which he addressed himself to them then in command or question. It was thus always the speed of his mind, rather than what they were perhaps justly loth to acknowledge as its superiority, that frightened them a little, and his admirers with them; and their error, enforced upon them somehow by his very presence, was to try to be speedier still whereas, in the wise slowness that was more natural to them, they might well have triumphed. Yet with him before them, they could not help but feel maundering and vague as it was.

And he held yet another weapon that caused them fear. This weapon was the word "maturity." Reasoning that seemed to him unsound, opinions advanced with either too much conviction or too little, behavior that struck him as, in one way or another, extravagant, and any person whom he suspected of being regularly guilty in any one of these ways, were all labeled by him alike as "immature." This definition tended to root itself deep in anyone unhappy enough to warrant it and to flower there into a general and curiously lasting condemnation. Whatever or whomever he most admired, on the other hand, was admirable, for him, to the extent to which he was able to call it "mature," and this judgment was also likely to last. He seemed so certain, so rich in rational and objective maturity himself. And all this was rather frightening to many.

Those who were not frightened were those who had

learned how to deal with him. They seldom tried to meet him on his own rapid ground, but either lured him to their own or shouted pleasantries across the wall. They made just the right kind of fun of him. But only a very few knew these things, and among them were Julie McMoon and Sara Dunn. Sam Dunn was not, or at least not altogether, not yet. As for Cowley, one could not be certain.

One hell of an evening, Lundrigan had said, and then they were both obliged to rise with the swollen beginnings of a wave. They watched it swell higher still, once it had passed them, and at last break with a rumble and a hiss against the beach.

"Anyway, I'm certainly glad you suggested this," said Cowley. "The water couldn't be much finer. Such a fine night." Lundrigan let this pass unanswered.

"Look," he said, "do you mind if I ask you a couple of things about what you saw the other day?" There was just the faintest hint in his voice that here was Cowley's chance to tell him in confidence, with no one to hear, that he had actually seen, as a matter of fact, just between the two of them, nothing, nothing at all; but the quick sincerity of the reply ignored this.

"No, I don't mind at all. I'll answer anything I can."

"Then as a matter of academic interest to me, just what was it you really did see? I mean I can understand its being indescribable beyond a point, but there must have been something before that, something out of the ordinary to make you realize what was happening."

"I remember," said Cowley slowly, as much to himself,

it seemed, as to Lundrigan, "that you were pretty nearly there at the time."

"Well, but not until later."

"Yes." The water lapped quietly against their bare shoulders.

"I take it that whatever it was had gone by then."

"Just about," said Cowley. "It was pretty nearly gone by then."

Lundrigan waited for him to continue.

"It was really very much like a person, I guess. I don't know why I didn't say that before."

"Why, I wonder."

"I don't know why.

"I know I sound like Dick Tracy," said Lundrigan, "but I'm very interested. Could you possibly say whether it was a man or . . . ?"

Cowley interrupted him.

"It was more like a woman," he said, quite as if he had never said it before, not even to himself. Although Lundrigan had been unusually cautious in his speech to this point, he was unable now to suppress a small and private exclamation.

"O.K. then," he said, "I'm going to try to outdo even Dick Tracy for a second. You know. The way they can look at a little red groove across a man's fingers and know not only that he's a fisherman, but what kind of fish he catches, and where, and when, and how he feels about his mother-in-law. Well, I've got more than that to go on, but I'm just a beginner anyway. You've given me more than one lead. First, what you saw was a person. Second, you didn't men-

tion that to the others. Third, you don't know why you didn't. And four, the person you saw was a woman."

Lundrigan spoke with what was, for him, a kind of gentleness, and, although his eyes were bright and keen on Cowley, there was a smile about his lips that seemed almost, if never quite, to suggest that what he was saying was possibly not of first importance, might even possibly be wrong. Cowley made no attempt to stop him. Lundrigan paused, as if, with something like mercy, to give him that last opportunity, but his friend, standing there in silence with his hair plastered wet and smooth by the sea, made no move to ask him what in the name of Heaven he was trying to say, nor halted him simply that he might continue no further with whatever it was. And Lundrigan continued.

"You saw," he said, "only what you wanted most to see. You triumphed in a dream as you hadn't been able to triumph waking. And your dream and your triumph were something you made for yourself. They came from nowhere but you—from your heart, your mind, from wherever such things are born. Call it a vision if you want, but you ought to know what it was a vision of.

"You saw a woman, a woman of infinite understanding and great beauty, who came to you when you were alone and needed her most. She spoke to you in something better, you say, than ordinary words, and so she did, for her tongue was the tongue of your deepest yearning, and her language was the language of your own imagination. So you fell in love with her there because she was all you'd ever hoped for, in fact she was your hope itself. And because the greatest

beauty, the greatest understanding, you'd ever found before were in what you called God, your religion, you naturally thought she must herself be sent by God. And so you decided there had been a miracle, and that you had been visited, like Moses, by some ambassador from Heaven.

"Now, like any young bridegroom, you want us all to go back with you Wednesday to see for ourselves your own true love, and, what I'm trying to tell you, my friend, is that we aren't going to see anything. We'll see nothing except . . ."

"Except?" said Cowley.

"Except a lonely man on a little hill," said Lundrigan.

Chapter Seven

ELLIE SONNTAG might have spoiled things had she been there, they feared, but, as it happened, she was not. There was no one more bothered than she herself by the slowness of her reading—slower even than George Bundle's, she knew, although he, to be just to her, was quicker than most, but then, after all, younger - and so, as often before, she spent the entire Monday afternoon following the Fourth of July alone in her room conscientiously perusing the exercises Cowley had assigned. You read through a passage of prose and then wrote out the answers to several questions upon it; then another passage and more questions. As a matter of fact, she even had her cocoa alone in her room and drank it at the table by the window, spilling an occasional drop on her open copy book and an occasional slow tear too because it was hard work and especially so when it was raining and when, as she knew, the others had finished in the morning and were no longer working at all. But she braved out the solitude and humiliation of it and managed to write considerably more than a single page of answers in a script that was neat and

legible even if a little blurred here and there by the drops of cocoa and her grief.

Then there was one other who might also, although in another way, have spoiled things, and that was Daisy McMoon, but because she was only seven and had been up well beyond her bedtime the night before, she was in Mr. Dunn's library resting and would remain there until her brother had concluded his business with the other boys upstairs and they could be taken home together. She, unlike Ellie, would not have spoiled things by protesting, but her presence alone would have disconcerted them, and her unnerving habit of asking *why* would have forced them to choose between the equally disagreeable tasks of either actually explaining to her their motive for planning as they did or, should they refuse that, of explaining it at least to themselves. Nor was theirs a scheme, nor they themselves such schemers, as might successfully have sustained any such investigation. Harry Fogg and Rufus Este, who had envisioned and captained the idea from the beginning, were quick to recognize this and understood that they could safely count on the co-operation of their younger friends only so long as anything so controversial as a motive was left out of the discussion altogether. Since both of the girls were occupied elsewhere, however, they were able to proceed with their design untroubled by this concern.

Daisy lay on a couch in the library alone among books that rose to the high ceiling on 'every side of her and tried through all the austere menacing strangeness of her surroundings to rest as she had been bidden; but, although she had gone even

so far as to frown her eyes tight shut so that the lids would not tremble and open of themselves, sleep had been impossible, and she was able to do no more than lie dutifully still there and search for some other placid diversion with which to pass what time was left her. By hitting one of the farther couch pillows with her feet, she was able to change the faces it made from a smiling old woman to a frightening old man, a little girl, a nightmare with caterpillars coming out of its eyes, a king; the softest pressure of her toes would make all the difference, and at one point there was even an elephant whose trunk curved around until it was lost in shadows. But then a face came that was too horrible to bear, for the head went up into a wicked point, and even as she watched, and without even touching it, the mouth opened wide and started throwing up all over her feet. She quickly curled her knees up against her stomach and rolled over on her side so that now a window and no longer the pillow was before her. It was difficult, of course, not to look back again, but it was raining outside and falling all over the windowpane, and that made it somewhat less difficult. Beyond the glass, the trees looked top-heavy and very green as they withstood the downpour, and they also made many changing faces but none that scared her. She tried making several herself, especially one that her brother, Timmy, was particularly good at, which involved drawing your lower eyelids down with the index fingers until the pink lining showed and at the same time pulling your mouth apart with your thumbs and sticking your tongue out as far as it would go. But she found that the pleasure of making faces when there was no one to see you

was a limited pleasure, and it was not long before she did nothing but simply watch the rain. When finally she looked around at the pillow, it had become no more than a pillow again, and she was no longer frightened. So she tried to frighten herself. "Spider, spider, spider," she whispered because her fear of spiders was very great, but this was largely unsuccessful. She crept her fingers lightly up her bare arm and tried to imagine them as nimble, hairy legs. So intent was she upon this that she did not notice Sam Dunn until some minutes after he had entered the room.

As soon as she was aware of his presence, she closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep. He opened his mouth wide and let the cigarette smoke curl down about his chin as he watched her.

"Fake," he said, and she peered up in time to see a little twist of smoke flatten itself out in the air between them. For a while they simply looked at each other and said nothing, Daisy lying on the couch, and Sam leaning against his books with one hand in his pocket.

"You are alone here," he finally said; "at least you were. What do you think about the weather?" Daisy gave no answer immediately, and Sam realized that the foolishness of his question had put him at a disadvantage. It was, indeed, a curious truth, and one which he had observed before, that you can speak nonsensically to a child with success only as long as there are other adults present whom you can trust to understand that it is, after all, a *conscious* nonsense you speak, and no less, if no more, than the proper and traditional way of addressing children. When you are alone with a child,

on the other hand, it is a far more precarious matter, almost fatally so, to remain complacent in your recognition of that significant disparity in age and intellect which otherwise appears to justify you in such whimsical condescensions; you run, needless to say, the risk of being condescended to yourself. In fact, when you are alone with a child, Sam had learned, you run many risks. He came across the room and sat near her.

"The others are upstairs," she said, continuing to disregard his remark about the weather and without taking her eyes from him, "but they're just playing. I've been taking a rest here alone by myself because I'm younger than they are."

"Yes," said Sam, "I know you are, but you won't always be, of course, so never mind. In a few years there won't be any difference at all."

"Oh yes, I know." She was lying on her back again by this time and staring towards the ceiling instead of at Sam, who could not help but stare at the ceiling himself. "There aren't any spiders here in this room," she added.

"I hope not, don't you?"

"No," she replied. "I like spiders."

"I don't."

She turned her head towards her companion as if to see whether she could trust him with her own true feelings about spiders, but said nothing.

"To return to our first subject," he continued, "the subject of age, you know, when I was a young man, Daisy, I sometimes used to meet little girls just about as old as you are now, and whenever I met them, the same thought always

used to come into my head. You wouldn't rather sleep, would you?"

"I've already slept," she said.

"Well, I always used to think when I met these little girls—I was in my twenties and they were six or seven or so—that it wouldn't be absolutely impossible for me to end up marrying one of them some day when they had grown up. I'm telling you this only because I'm fairly sure you have no idea what I'm talking about. Not that it matters. I'd think to myself then, well, when I'm forty, they'll be in their twenties, and then we might easily get married, but now . . ." He paused while she wiped her nose with the back of her small hand. "Now," he said, "I don't think that any more because I'm too old."

Satisfied that there actually were no spiders, Daisy turned to him once more. "Are you the oldest person in this house?" she asked.

"I suppose I am."

She absorbed this information for whatever it was worth to her before speaking again. "Feel my stomach," she asked. The hiss of the rain made the room seem more silent even than it was as Sam did what he had been told.

"It's a nice enough stomach," he said, but, as rarely happened, he did not smile as he said it.

"Timmy says they swell all up like a frog's when you get older and marry."

"Sometimes," Sam said. "Your brother's largely right." He removed his hand. "Who do you expect to marry, Daisy?"

"Oh," she said wearily, "my brother, I guess," and exhaled

a little breath of resignation. "He's much stronger than I am."

Sam made no reply but leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. There had been times, and he could not avoid recalling them now, when in the midst even of passion he had had to struggle incongruously against sleep, had had to disguise his somnolence as languor, only to fail usually at both to the anger or, at best, the thunderous amusement of whoever excelled him, and there were many, at sustaining situations more than ordinarily lifelike. He closed his eyes now under the curious weight of realizing that before him now was one for whom the very idea of anything like passion was as entirely foreign as to him it was commonly wearisome, and with whom he might therefore, except that of course he might not, fall almost in love; but even so delicate a conjecture as this lost him in a drowsiness whence only the appearance of Sara was able after a short time to arouse him. She came to tell him of the arrival of Peter and his friend Dr. Lavender, and asked that he accompany her to greet them. Without saying anything further to Daisy, who herself remained silent, he rose from his chair.

"I'll be right with you, my dear," he said. "But first I must go upstairs and wash my hands. I've been touching the child." And then he smiled his slow way out of the library, followed by Sara and watched by Daisy, who was again drawing her fingers lightly across her bare arm.

The sound of his mounting footsteps caused the boys upstairs momentary alarm, but when he stopped after the first flight, they returned to their task.

The room where they sat, although known as the play-room, was still as much of a storeroom as anything else, but it was large enough with its low ceiling and walls of beaver-board so that in spite of the numerous suitcases, a carton of ice-skates and old brushes, two mah-jong sets, a broken sun-lamp and more besides, there was ample space for the children to play or be silent as they chose. Because it lay directly beneath the roof, the rain sounded there with heavy resonance, and at the dormer window, trapped by dusty glass from its nest beneath the eaves, a single wasp buzzed busy and unmoved above four dead flies that lay like stale raisins on the sill.

On top of a ruined chaise-longue in the center of the room stood George Bundle draped in a white sheet so voluminous that his hands and arms were lost somewhere in the folds, and only his bare feet and ankles showed beneath it. The toes pointed out like a dancer's, but no other portion of his body was distinguishable through the cloth that shrouded it, and even his head, with a flimsy hood to hide his ears, neck and hair, revealed no more than a thin lozenge of face looking down at his companions with an uncertain expression most difficult to read since his features had been thoroughly disguised with the white cream that Harry Fogg used for his complexion. His eyes alone were easily recognizable, and they seemed curiously placid and heedless of the extravagance of his attire.

"Do you think we should?" asked Fendall Dunn, and he showed the silence with which his question was met to be a difficult one for him by hiding his face under the pretext of

picking his nose. George Bundle turned slightly on his platform, turned rather as a dancer might turn, with one heel off the ground and the slender toes but light upon it, and in so doing displaced the hood sufficiently to reveal a lock of his light hair. Rufus Este arose and set it straight again.

"You must hold still," he said, "or the whole thing will be ruined. "Of course we should," he added to Fendall.

"Now try it again," said Harry Fogg.

"Jesus Christ," obeyed the figure in the sheet, "the Son of God," turned three times around with his arms raised like wings beneath the white cloth, and then, facing them once more, let his head drop to his chest and stretched his arms out horizontally to either side.

This was done surprisingly well with no embarrassment and with such slow gravity that, the rain falling, the wasp, and the gray light as accomplice, there was a sense as rich as the mysteriously formless afternoon itself of revelation followed by death, of a child with the thin face of wonder brought at last, wide-armed and bent, to acceptance—acceptance of, as much as anything, the rain, a game that was more or less than a game, the indecipherable meditations of his beholders. And he did it again, speaking more softly this time as Rufus had directed, and no less successfully.

"That's really quite wonderful," said Harry Fogg, who was much more easily moved than Rufus. It was perhaps his greatest talent, and Rufus admired him for it more, almost, than he admired anyone else for anything. It showed him, he thought, to be truly poetic, and that was a conception of great importance to them both. Harry also looked rather

like a poet, Rufus thought, with his large eyes more green than blue and paler than his dark skin, his lips sensuous and well-curved but tight at the corners, his nose slightly turned up at the tip. His appearance was another reason for which Rufus very much admired his friend, and he went even so far as occasionally to hurt him by speaking of his pimples so that he might never know how much. This did in fact, when it happened, hurt Harry Fogg unspeakably.

"Yes, it really is," said Rufus, who was moved to see that Harry was, and then again on his own account. "You can sit down now." George Bundle sat, and only then, in a position no longer as unusual to him as his costume, showed a certain self-consciousness.

"You all see how it will work then?" said Rufus.

"I see all right," said Fendall, "but I don't like it." He spoke more loudly than was necessary even with the patter of the rain as strong as it had become. "You all think you're very smart, but I don't, I think it's dumb."

"The trouble with you," George said, "is that you're scared."

"I don't care what you think because I'm not going to do it anyway."

"Oh, come on," said Harry.

"No!"

"He's just a horrible rat," said Timmy McMoon, "so why bother with him."

"A rat dressed up rather badly to look like a person," said Harry.

"So are you," cried Fendall, "only worse. And I know

what you do alone at night when there's nobody else around!"

"If there's nobody else around, how *can* you know?"

"I do anyway, and that's why you have so many pimples."

Harry blushed.

"Oh don't worry," Rufus interrupted. "We'll do just as well without him. Timmy can stand right behind George instead, and it will still be even."

"That's what you think," said Fendall. "None of you'll stand anywhere, and I know why."

They ignored him and reviewed their plans once more. They were sure that Daisy could be persuaded to join them when the time came, but there was some doubt about Ellie. They considered going down and telling her about it right away, but then decided against it, not knowing that she would, in her misery, have welcomed any suggestion, however fantastic. In all, nevertheless, they were sure, or pretended to be sure, that they would be successful in their scheme. It was difficult to know, although the younger ones gave no signs of uncertainty, whether or not they fully believed what they were saying.

Surely, at any rate, Fendall did, and a conversation that omitted him altogether seemed to anger him more than one whose very purpose was to do so, for he broke in upon them in a voice high with annoyance.

"You'd better change your plans," he called out, "because I'm going to tell on you. I'll tell them everything, and will you ever be sorry—all of you!" He jumped to his feet and ran to the door, making the mistake of stopping there to add, "I'm going to tell them *now!*"

Timmy McMoon reached the door before he had the chance to open it and, in the struggle that followed, brought him to the floor. He was somewhat smaller than his adversary, but swifter and cleverer in his movements, and managed, although in unending peril of being thrown off, to sit on his chest and hold him there.

"Let's give him a pink belly," he muttered to George, who had run to assist him, his voice coming in gasps from the violent contortions with which Fendall tried to free himself, and at this his friend ran to the pile of cartons and suitcases and returned carrying a discarded scrubbing brush with stiff, dark bristles. Rufus came over to watch, and Harry remained by the window where he was.

Because they were all talking at once, and Fendall screaming intermittently throughout, no one thought emerged clear from all that were being expressed, and it was apparent only that Fendall's treachery was, at any cost, to be prevented. George, by kneeling on them, managed to hold fast his arms, and Timmy, by lying diagonally across his legs and keeping one fist pressed against his throat, was able with his free hand to rip back their victim's shirt. Two buttons were torn off in the process and slid across the smooth floor. There was still the undershirt to be removed, with its phrase of "Ride 'Em Cowboy" lettered in faded blue across the chest, but Timmy let his head fall for a moment inert upon it, his cheek pressed in weariness against the belly, hot and taut, which he could feel burning through it. Then, when Fendall's struggling momentarily ceased and there was no sound but that of their breathlessness, he was able to pull back that

thin covering of cotton too, and, sitting erect now upon the thighs that protested once more, began to chafe the bared stomach with his heavy brush. His strokes fell brisk and hard against the naked flesh, but there was time for only one more scream from Fendall, a scream not of anger, as previously, but of pain, before Harry Fogg intervened.

He was not only larger and stronger than they, but their extreme surprise at seeing enraged one who was ordinarily so mild, assisted him in his attack, and in a moment they were separated, and Fendall free again to lean back against the wall of beaver-board, his hair damp and disheveled, and to press his hands to either side of his stomach, pink and rough from its punishment but with the skin still unbroken. Although there were tears in his eyes, and perspiration and saliva, dry and dusty, on his face, he was curiously silent, and only his body heaved in memory of its exertions. George Bundle, his sheet discarded in the fracas, but his face still white as a clown's, listened to Timmy McMoon's subdued and earnest justifications of his violence directed partially to him and partially to Harry Fogg, who stood, still shaken by his anger, near them. Rufus leaned over comforting Fendall, promising him anything, anything, if only he would not start to cry again or reveal in any other way what had happened because again they had all heard the sound of mounting footsteps on the stairway. In their apprehensive silence they heard too, for the first time, that the rain had stopped. A little wind blew through the window, and with it the hitherto unnoticed chirp and trill of birds. They were none of them prepared for the stranger who opened the door.

Thomas Lavender stood there on the threshold with Peter Cowley just behind him for what seemed to them all an age of silence and gazed down upon them so intensely with his round, watery eyes that it was as if he saw beyond them or did not see them at all. His slow smile was of such vagueness that it appeared not only to greet the children before him now, but to remember imperfectly having long ago, and with a delicacy of emotion difficult to recall, greeted many like them at even such a time as this, following a rain, in the stillness of late afternoon. What, actually, he was remembering, had no connection as direct as that with the moment at hand, for his mind returned—he could not think why, yet he *tried* to think why, and this added length and uncertainty to his smile—to a time when he was younger, not long after he had entered the ministry, and had seen for the first time the gardens at Versailles. Suddenly, down an avenue of chestnuts enfiltered here and there with dusty bands of summer sun, he had come upon a little lake whence Apollo springs in his chariot, sentried by dolphins, his horses half submerged and glistening with the day into which they are about to rise, and he had found himself beholding the spectacle of an elegance so dead that it would take, he had thought, or thought now, more even than the mountainous severing of atoms to shock it back into life. Even the greatest delight, he had mused—and he was unable then to imagine a delight greater than the designing, the planting, the possession of those gardens and fountains—even the greatest delight, he had moralized, came at last to an end and yet remained, as the Apollo remained, in such a way that no one could deny or forget that it was

to an end that it had come. And so he had been doubly moved by the spectacle not only of the god mounting to light the sky, but of his own emotion at beholding it too, and his eyes had watered a little then and, indeed, watered a little again now, standing there with Peter behind him in the darkness of the corridor.

"Hello," he said as, finally, he entered the room. His smile struggled back to where it concerned itself once more with them.

"This is Dr. Lavender. He teaches at the same school I do," Cowley said, and then named to his friend the five boys who were sitting there. There was only a murmur of recognition from them, for he was a stranger and what they took to be a very old one. He was also a man whose name they had heard before, who had something to do with what Cowley had seen and with what he was.

"I'm not really a teacher," Dr. Lavender said to them. "I'm a learner; or at least I try to be." Rufus nudged Harry, and they tried to avoid each other's glance.

"I wonder . . ." he continued, and then he paused for so long that they could almost not believe that he had spoken at all. His eyes were large and wet, and there was something about him that made them want to laugh. It was his gray hair for one thing, for it was very thin on top and rose there in little wisps that looked rather like the topknots of certain dolls with which they had once been intimate, dolls with names like Kewpie and Oystereyes. And when he smiled, as now he did, the two small lines between his eyebrows were as deep as when he frowned, and that made it a very intense

smile, almost like a comedian's, but not quite like a comedian's, not enough to make them laugh, because he somehow managed to look quite sad at the same time. And his eyes were wet. He was not as tall as Cow, and he did not stand as straight. He had said "I wonder," and they were still waiting for him to finish.

" . . . why you have painted your face so white."

"It was a game," said George Bundle.

"Oh," said Dr. Lavender. It was perhaps something about the Dunns' garden that had reminded him, he thought: the tall and heavily green trees multiprofiled in the rain. Peter had even pointed out a fountain on their way, with no Apollo to be sure, but a stone swan, and quite as dead. Or was it, he wondered, a pelican, beak plunged into its own breast to feed its young, the reckless gesture of self-sacrifice? No.

"What game were you playing?"

"Oh, we just made it up," said Timmy McMoon.

"Yes, but what was it about?" he asked.

"Just some poor fish," said Timmy. Even Fendall had to laugh at that, and Dr. Lavender with him.

"Well," he said.

It became quickly and happily clear to them that Fendall would not, now, betray them as he had threatened. Although it has no generally recognized leaders and can therefore never act with that unity of purpose which would otherwise empower it perhaps above all others, the unrecognized empire of children is as nationalistic as it is vast, and any internal dissension is rapidly forgotten in the face of interference from

without. Hence Fendall forgot even the smarting of his stomach and regarded the intrusion of Cowley and his friend, their banter, with the same unfathomable blandness of expression as his compatriots.

Oystereyes forgot that to the Roi Soleil alone the fountains seemed to play forever, seemed never, even once the monarch passed, to cease, as cease they did when he was gone, switched on again by those to whom his disenchantment boded peril, the ingenuousness of his deceived delight assured prosperity; and he marveled, sitting beneath the broken sun-lamp, his arm on a casket of mah-jong, at the scattered brightness of what seemed to him their endless, ardent innocence.

“Certainly, Peter,” he said, carried quite away by what he felt, his voice mild and high-pitched, “this is a good and happy life, for ‘Verily I say unto you, except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven,’ and here you are, dear friend, so much among them that you can hardly become anything else. This is a queer, twisty old house,” he paused and looked through the window to see that it had started to rain again in the garden, “and I haven’t met any of the grownups yet, but no matter where the house twists to and no matter who the grownups are, you have done right in coming here, and I know you’ve done right in bringing me, and I’m thankful, Peter, thankful, thankful to you.” His voice was unsteady with all the emotion one might have expected had he been addressing a very old Cowley, who had reached the end of a great career.

“Oh little children,” he said, “never, never let a tear fall

in a garden that you love. It is a hateful, sinful thing to do because . . .” his voice was suddenly stiff with anger, “. . . because it reminds the garden of death.”

He rose and crossed to the window.

“You don’t know what I mean,” he said after a time. “And I am glad.”

“It’s good to have you here, Tc’n,” said Cowley, watching George Bundle, his face as white as the sky, look up at Rufus Este, who pressed a polka-dot handkerchief to his nose and mouth.

Thomas Lavender appeared not to have heard but stood with his back to the room, looking down at the sill or at whatever lay upon the sill. Then he turned with a distracted smile, one hand stretched out before him.

“Old friend!” he whispered.

Chapter Eight

SARA laughed. "It's really all such an impossible mess," she said, "that I'm amused. Mad as hell of course, but amused."

Even the little bitch, dirty white and short-haired, whose humble stance not far from them on the lawn announced her as perhaps the meanest of the earth's creatures, seemed unable to resist the jubilance of that summer morning. Cringing there in one continuous curve from her scrawnlily defenseless neck to the tip of her thin tail that trembled apologetically against the underside of her belly, she goggled her bulging eyes and smiled a wry and twisted smile to see the brightness and warmth of grass and trees still damp from the rain of the preceding day.

Sara looked up from the large blue and white china bowl into which she was shelling peas and called out to the little burst of red hair down by the pond.

"Rufus!" she cried, "are you the one who's lured this creature here?"

"What?" His voice came rather faintly through the trees.

"Oh dear," she said, "he'll think I mean Dr. Lavender."

"Is that your dog?" she called more loudly.

"Certainly not. . . ."

"Oh well," she said, quietly again, to Sam, "one more or less doesn't matter much the way things are." The dog came over and lay on its back beside her, resigned to the worst the world might offer.

"Just like buttons on a vest," she said, patting it absent-mindedly. "Really, what a mess."

"When does she arrive?" Sam asked, closing his book. "The model."

"This afternoon. I would even like to start work this afternoon if I could. But now . . ."

Sara had met Thomas Lavender for the first time at dinner the evening before. His shoes had creaked slowly across the dining-room floor towards her, and by candle-light he had seemed to her a very much older man than actually he was. Peter had introduced them, and his greeting to her was "I have met your lovely children" so that she had been obliged to explain that, on the contrary, only one of them was hers, and he was unable to identify which one. Sam had said the ugliest one, and at that point, Sara swore to him later, tears had grown bright in the old man's eyes. "The ugliest one," he had replied, "is always buried alive. Each one of us is a child buried alive, and that is ugly." The conversation had then, for a time, passed him uneasily by.

It was not that he was unable, Dr. Lavender, to speak perfectly reasonably, and indeed he had done so at dinner, had spoken, Sara remembered, of his school for instance, and in such matter-of-fact terms as enrollment and curriculum,

and of his experiences at speaking over the radio, for, as she had learned earlier from Peter, the fame of his school sermons had become sufficiently widespread to warrant such diffusion; but, even in the very midst of such talk, something he said or that he heard, or something that he saw, or something altogether different still, would halt him, and then very often Sara thought she could see tears that never quite left his eyes but glistened precariously there, or he would say something that struck her as quite meaningless, or he would simply cease speaking entirely, sometimes in the middle of a statement, only to return to it later, occasionally much later, as though nothing had intervened. At one point she had been asking Sam whether he thought she should call up Julie McMoon to thank her for having sent some fruit left over from the picnic for the children's lunch, and Sam had been about to reply when Dr. Lavender, who had been talking to Cowley, interrupted. "Mrs. Dunn," he had said, and then paused. Silence had paraded slowly about the dark table like a piper, Sam tipped to his lips a water glass from which he drank nothing, and the flame of one of the candles had, for no apparent reason, flickered low and bright against the wick. And then he had continued. "You shouldn't ever let a telephone ring in the house of someone you love."

"He is a strange one," Sara had said later to her husband.

"Just a very sentimental old man," Sam answered.

"But not *that* old."

"Certainly that sentimental, however," he had concluded, but the term struck neither of them as adequate.

They had turned then, Sara sitting with a cigarette in her

hand on a bed that bore the word "Amour" painted across its head, Sam reclining upon its twin inscribed "Repos," to a discussion of the imminent arrival of Sara's model. She could not be certain, Sara had said, whom the agency would send, but she had requested the one named Mollie—Sam would remember her perhaps—because Mollie had sat for her often before, and in a way she seemed peculiarly suited to answer the needs of a statue to be called Abundance, celebrating, in a single female figure, the richness of mid-western harvests and the fertility of its land and people. Not that she was strapping, Sara had protested, not that she suggested in any bodily way the plow or the churn, but there was, and she closed her eyes and with her hand drew an outline through the air as she spoke of it, there was a slimness about her, a fair girlishness, that would beautifully imply the *potential* quality of what her likeness should be fashioned to represent. How much more subtle, how much more artistic, Sara had continued with the eloquence with which she felt herself always gifted when discussing her craft, to present Abundance in the form of—picture it!—a girl, and at just the point *before* she became the great earth-mother, the propagator of men. She would portray her at the very moment when, on tiptoes, her arms outstretched, she stood there with her face for the first time joyously illumined by her sense of what she was about to become; still lithe and young, still virginal, but already . . . Here Sara had been distracted from further expatiation upon her art by the sudden remembrance of certain more immediate problems. Chaste as Mollie might appear in clay, her actual reputation

was, if one could believe what one heard, something else again, and the present nature of the Dunns' household seemed one that forbade ignoring the matter. In what room might they best put her, in what way could she be most discreetly kept from any extended association with the others, and Sara had continued to confront her husband with such queries until finally, yawning, he had suggested a bedroom near their own and remarked that the girl would, after all, be busy posing most of the time anyway. The lateness of the hour and her own desire for sleep had inclined Sara to accept this solution, but in the brilliance of the next morning it arose to worry her, and she looked up from her china bowl to pursue it once more.

"Sam," she said, and found then that he had gone. She found too that Rufus was no longer down by the pond but that he had been succeeded there by Cowley and Lavender, and from this she concluded that, with lessons over, it must be past noon, and returned to the house to give the peas to the cook.

"I don't know," said Cowley, and for a while they said nothing. The crumb of bread that Dr. Lavender threw hit his own reflection and shattered it into a grimace. Circles spread to the edge of the pond. He threw another. The mud-slow carp dallied incuriously beneath it until one large one floated to the surface and snapped it up with a great, heavy mouth, then sped down and out of sight.

What had Lundrigan told him when they were standing in the sea, Cowley wondered. What had he meant by it, and

what was the truth of it? But there was no doubt what he had meant by it. But there was doubt. He tried casting it into the pond the way that Thomas Lavender cast crumbs, but it would not sink, his doubt, no fish would touch it, and it seemed to intensify rather than to shatter his reflection. He looked away from the water. Could Tom help him, the wise Tom? Peter had scarcely known him when, one morning during the winter term several years before, he had looked up from his paper and said, "Peter, go read Saint Paul. That is my word to you, and it will cost you one thick nickel." A light snow was falling, and together they had walked back through it to the class building, along a white and un-Damascine road, past boys running to reach their masters' rooms before the last stroke of the last bell. That had been the beginning.

The end had not come, Cowley thought, through listening to Lundrigan. After they had finished talking there, Cowley had been the first to rise up out of the sea with the water falling from his bare shoulders like a banner and his flesh all tightened by its chillness, and he had walked across the still warm sand praying to find somewhere not only forgiveness but, with a void of new silence between them, love for this man, and praying too that he might not see what had been said to him as any end. The very fact that Lavender, quite as though nothing had happened, was beside him now, sitting by the pond on a flat stone with the milk white of an ankle mottled by the green of sun through high leaves, one shoe untied, bread in his hand, was indication of a kind that he had been successful in his prayer. Or could it be that Dr.

Lavender's presence there meant more accurately nothing, knowing, as he knew without phrasing it to himself, that his elderly friend would be likely to come wherever there was a garden unbarred to him; would be likely to come, barred or not, were the garden dear enough and the wall not too great, his fingers clutching the stone-work so that the nails turned pink against it, his wisp of gray hair rising above the edge, then one struggling foot, until, astride at last with his watery, dim smile, he would leap down, leaving the print of his fall in the impressionable turf? It was difficult to be certain.

"I don't know," Cowley repeated. "Lundiigan was wrong, of course, though I shouldn't say it because who's to say that anybody's wrong or even right. But I know what I saw, and it was not what he said. Though it was . . ."

Lavender threw a pebble into the pond, and when it hit the water, he heard it make the sound "Defunct."

"I must show him that he was wrong," Cowley continued suddenly, "and I will, God willing."

"I suppose." Lavender clasped his hands about his knees. "God willing. But that will be a little thing, when you've done it. It won't be a big thing, Peter, and you mustn't go making the mistake of thinking that it will."

"I don't understand," Cowley said, and with a sigh that gave his remark greater relevance than he intended.

"Oh I hope you do, Peter. I do hope you understand that there's nothing very simple about life, Peter, especially your life." Dr. Lavender neither smiled nor frowned, but his expression changed as he turned from staring down into the water to the no less complicated task of staring across at his

friend. "You'd be making a mistake if you thought that by proving to Lundrigan your vision came from, well, where it *did* come from, and not as he suggested, you'd be proving anything else too, you'd be doing any more than a little thing. Little, you see, as the world goes, and, though big in a way, big to *us* maybe, not really big. As the world goes, you see. I think you're trying to prove too much by it, Peter. Don't, don't make that mistake."

He searched the younger man's face with a gentle, dreaming look that grew partly out of the compassion he truly felt for him, but partly too out of his happy recollections of the dinner he had eaten with the Dunns the evening before. There had been coarse, warm potatoes, yellowed with melting butter and made piquant with salt and a sparing admixture of chopped chives; in the gravy the overcooked onions were, although faintly sweet, more texture than taste, and the string-beans were crisp and hot. There had been the delicious sips of cool water and then, after dessert, the coffee. He had excused himself, when dinner was over, and had gone upstairs to rinse his false teeth with warm water before joining his new friends once more, refreshed and wonderfully drowsy. His mouth felt clean, and there was only a subtle trace of coffee on his breath. Part of his contentedness returned to him now as he spoke to Peter, and his eyes grew soft and kind with his memory of it.

"It's only in a fairy tale," he went on, taking his time, "only in a story written for children, that you can trust life—not *really* life, you understand—to that extent; where you're told and can be certain that if a particular thing happens or

does not happen, all will be well. If only the prince can kill the dragon and set the princess free, you're promised they'll live happily ever after, and you know they will, Peter, and oh they do! But in the real world, my friend," the softness left his eyes, "and in tragedy too—how funny that it should apply to them both—you can't help but realize that no such promise is made or, if it is, that the chances are it will be broken, broken because there are the haggling, miserly demands of so many other facts and conditions, and the world is no longer innocent enough, as perhaps it once was, to be unaware of them and to live a good and happy life on the simple basis of the fairy tale: do this, and all will go well for you. In real life, Peter, you not only have to kill the dragon and set the princess free, but you may have to set a hundred other and less innocent things free too, and imprison as many more; you may have to kill more than one dragon, maybe thirteen, maybe even yourself, and even then, when you've done all of this, done it nobly and well, the whole situation may have changed. Then you may discover that all you've done was not only unnecessary but sometimes even worse than that, sometimes even as wrong and harmful as you thought it was right and good.

"Go ahead and show Lundrigan and the Dunns, the whole world for that matter, your vision in all its loveliness, and you still, Peter, may not have proved anything to them; they may, at least, not think you have. And even if you have, even if they know it, it may not make any difference then, and you won't have done anything else. Just this one little thing. But go and do it anyway, Peter, do it *of course*, but

remember that in life, for us now, there are so many things to do, and no one of them assures success."

"No one of them maybe," said Cowley, "but all of them. If you can *do* all of them, if you take care, Tom, and with God's help."

"Yes," said Lavender. "That's true, and then somehow you've been taken by the hand, Peter. I don't know why. But it doesn't matter. And I've made a mistake, you know." The look of desperate earnestness with which he paused, his mouth set firm and the slightest tremor about his head, might almost have been misunderstood as signs of anger had it not been for the dazed immobility of his glance towards the pond, into which he finally threw another crumb. From somewhere, beyond the house or beyond the trees, came the imperfect report of a cry.

"I said the world was no longer innocent enough to see things simply, to believe that if a certain thing happened or does not happen, all may be well, and the reason is that the world, like me, is aware of all the complexities of so many other things which may or do happen to upset that lovely sequence. Christ knew about those complexities, but he was able to see things simply in spite of them and always spoke in the simplest terms. 'Whosoever shall humble himself as a little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven,' for instance. Do this, be like a little child, and all will go well for you. That's not only beautiful, but it's true too, and we believe it because He believed it, but we do not become as little children of course, and only say as an excuse, just as I said a few minutes ago, that the world is no longer

innocent enough to see things so simply. But I was wrong, Peter. That was my mistake. Innocence, simplicity are not dead in the world, and when I said they were, I had forgotten the children.

"They, if no one else, Peter, the children, who can believe in fairy tales and hence in the truth too, see happiness as being within easy reach, as being theirs on one simple condition."

"What is that," Cowley asked, "that one condition?" For a long time Dr. Lavender made no reply. .

"Oh I forget," he said at last. "It's been so long that you could hardly expect me to remember." He laughed. "Or maybe I never knew at all. But I do think I remember that somehow a child, for whom complexity doesn't exist, always knows it will be happy if only one certain thing happens. I wish I could remember, but it has been so long. I think I once knew. But he knows. He knows, Peter. Look there."

Dr. Lavender pointed to the far side of the pond where George Bundle had appeared from the wood. He advanced a few steps, spun three times around, and then paused as though listening to someone before repeating the performance. Around he spun, three times more, his arms outstretched, and then paused again. In a few moments Rufus Este, who had been standing concealed by the trees from Lavender and Cowley, emerged and was the first to notice that they were being watched. He indicated this with a side-long glance to George, and then waved.

"Hi!" he called.

"What are you folks up to?" asked Cowley.

"Just a game."

George Bundle had started to edge back towards the trees when he was halted by a cry from Lavender. "Can I play?"

Unable himself to answer, George turned to his friend. Rufus tried to laugh loudly enough so that Dr. Lavender might hear and realize that his request was understood, as doubtlessly he had intended it, to be a joke, and consequently it was not a very successful laugh.

"What?" cried Dr. Lavender.

"What?" answered Rufus.

"Can I play too?"

"Yes, but . . ." But his qualification, whatever its nature, was lost because it was too long and swift to shout.

Off went Dr. Lavender, his jacket flapping out behind him, the long way around the pond. Where he came to a tree, he swung about it with one hand or both clasping the trunk, and stones he leapt, his shoes glistening from the wet lawn while all about him the grass that grew high by the water or short and mingled with moss beneath the larger trees, and the trees themselves, each single leaf of them, seemed pearled by the light of sun caught sparkling and alive there in the moisture of the earlier rain. It was like a landscape viewed through tears, all blurred and warmly shining, scattered everywhere with tiny seeds of light. The earth was soft and springing underneath his feet, and above him the sky was blue as an eye and free of cloud.

From time to time, as he neared the two awaiting him and skipped on heedless of the shrilly pained hilarity of Rufus, and George's less abandoned mirth, he would twirl three

times around, then twirl again, in emulation of the game which he had seen and wished to join now as passionately as he had for some time wished anything. When he reached them, they received him with gratitude and malice.

Among themselves, in a similar situation and with no more than three taking part, they would have tended to choose something placid and verbal like Twenty Questions, Truth or Consequences, or even more probably, and stemming perhaps from these, no specific game at all but simply whispered, warm-breathed discussions of topics mysterious and forbidden, or eye-lowering revelations even of bare-legged intimacies, hushed and superbly depraved. But the wild incongruity of the old man's participation forced them now to a sport of equal wildness that would both reward him for the shrieking incredibility of his having, as an adult, joined them, and punish him for the treason of that very presumption. In love as they were with the idea of his presence there, they were obliged to hurt him not only for its own queer sake, but because, although he could never be one of them, they must, as though he could indeed be one of them and was, hurt him as barbarously even as they hurt one another, and also because, most simply of all, it was necessary, as fantasitics, to proceed fantastically. So they decided upon Statues and, after first preparing themselves with leaves and spikes of fern thrust in their hair, they allowed him to remove his spectacles, and then, because he was too bald to adorn as they had now adorned themselves, they took fistfuls of grass and rubbed it over his scalp, torturing wisps of the gray topknot, and chanting breathlessly and erratically through-

out, Who put the ink in Mrs. Murphy's drink, Who put the spider in Mrs. Murphy's cider. He felt the pain of it, they saw, but his head, even though cuffed from side to side in their excitement and somewhat stained with green, bore still that inane, willing smile which little Bundle would suddenly have almost died to ruin, and only barely did not, with the bug-crawling dirt of the undersides of stones. Who put the Jew in Mrs. Murphy's stew, and his docility, although it endangered their ardor, incensed them too, and helped them to begin the game itself. Each took one of his hands, laughing, and he laughing with them, and whirled him around and around there by the side of the pond with George Bundle shouting, Who put the fish in Mrs. Murphy's dish, Who put the eye in Mrs. Murphy's pie, the sun spilling down upon them and Cowley standing now across the water with one hand raised before him, until Dr. Lavender lost his balance and was released by them to go stumbling and hurtling backwards where he fell flat, hard, one leg in the air, among wet stones.

He tried for an instant to rest there immobile but could not because, folding the air into curious shapes with his hands and letting his raised foot fall to the ground, he gave a little shout that he had not meant to give, and wept.

It was curiously that little dropping of his foot rather than the original fall itself that made him finally weep, and he wept until his cheeks were wet and he could taste the tears themselves in the corners of his grimacing mouth. So suddenly had the fall itself occurred that, painful though it was,

his surprise and incredulity precluded all possibility of grief on that account, and it was instead this minor accident, as something he had been able to consider however briefly before it happened, as something he had tried intensely, if only for an instant, to prevent, which overwhelmed him in the end. He saw it, and cried to see it, as a defeat over which he might be said to have had some control, and as—hence the nearly unbearable tragedy for him—a defeat of his body, defeated not so much because it was bodily hurt nor because he had been unable in this trivial particular to protect it, but because, after years of human indifference, he was forced abruptly to see it as nothing other than what indeed it was and what he had so quite forgotten it to be: an old man's body, pathetic in having been so long and variously neglected, tragic in being still vulnerable to even such grotesque mischance as this. A heel for long accustomed to nothing more harsh than the carpeted pulpit or polished schoolroom floor, a leg grown soft and helpless under the endless solicitudes of garters, trousers, the warm water of baths, found themselves suddenly, unexpectedly, falling, then fallen, down upon the little shore of sharp, wet pebbles that bordered the pond where now he lay.

"Oh, you are hurt! He is hurt. . . ." The children kneeled beside him, flushed with fear, and tried to get him to his feet.

"No, no. But I can't see without my glasses." They had remained somehow unbroken, and he put them on again, the lenses blurred and wet. "Only cut a little here." He showed them his hand scraped across the knuckles and

scarcely bleeding. "Who put the mud in Mrs. Murphy's blood. . . ." He looked as though he were about to laugh or break into a hideous smile, but it was instead only the face he made when he cried, and the children continued to watch it entranced until he turned away to halt their gaze. They felt in the depths of their bowels their fear at the grief they had caused him, and their scalps grew cold with the terror of it. It was only when he turned to them again, his face more nearly composed, that they could believe at all that he was perhaps not broken there upon the stones and dying. "There, watch yourself!" He caught hold of George Bundle's sleeve as one of the boy's feet slipped into the pond.

"You're crying," George said. "Now Mr. Cowley's coming."

"That's no reason to drown yourself," said Rufus. Recognizing that his personality and that of his inferior, George Bundle, had become momentarily and humiliatingly indistinguishable one from another during the frenzy of their game, he became irritated and tried, with the heavy irony of his remark, to show both Bundle and the old man too that now, restored to something less than fear or frenzy, he was his separate, conscious self once more.

"Oh no!" Dr. Lavender raised himself on one elbow and wiped his eyes. "Don't drown yourself. You . . ."

"What's happened to him? What have you *done*? Here—can you . . ."

"Yes, yes. I can by 'myself. There. No, it was me, Peter. I'm the one."

"But they shouldn't have done it."

"I asked *them*."

"Still." His voice was unsteady. "They should be punished."

"Punished, Peter? When I'm the one? Let them run along. Run along, Harry."

"He's Rufus," said George.

"Rufus and . . ."

"George."

"Well, run along now, George. I'm sorry, sorry . . ."

"I'm sorry," said Rufus.

"I wish we'd never begun," said George.

"Man, you're doing your wishing too late. Rufus, you're the oldest."

"We're both sorry," said George.

"Oh let them run along."

"Go on," said Peter. "Go on along then."

"Are you all right, Tom?" he asked, once the boys had gone. "How is your hand? I'd've come sooner only it was so quick, and I wasn't sure what was happening."

Dr. Lavender rose to his feet but, as if he had not heard, answered nothing. He slowly brushed the earth from his coat and trousers.

"Your head," said Peter. He bowed his head, and Cowley wiped away the stains of green with his handkerchief. "I guess they just forgot you weren't one of them, Tom."

"I'm not one of them," said Dr. Lavender, "and that's the answer."

"Yes, I expect it is."

"But you don't know what I mean. You don't know what it's the answer *to*."

"What, Tom?" Lavender started to walk back around the pond. There was a streak of mud on his shoulder, and his thin hair was more disarrayed than usual, but there was no other trace of his fall except for his hand, and he kept that in his pocket. He walked slowly, looking down at the grass, and Cowley followed him.

"It's the answer I couldn't remember a little while ago," he said. "Do you remember a little while ago, Peter? (It wasn't their fault because I asked *them*, and there's no need for any punishing; you'd only be punishing me; well, and maybe you should.) I said a child knows it would be happy if only one certain thing happens, and then I forgot what the one thing was. Silly. But I remember it now, and it's funny, isn't it, what made me remember. A child knows it would be happy *if there were nothing but children in the world*. That is the one thing, and how could I forget it? (My knee hurts a little.) And they're right, Peter. They would be happy then, and, more than that, the world would be saved then, because, with only children living in it, it would see things simply again, and in order for the world to be saved, the world must see things simply again and in innocence. Here now, sit down here." They had come full circle about the pond, crossed the grass, and sat down against the wall that hid from them the house and upper lawn.

"A child knows that if there were nothing but children in the world, all would be well, and that is like a fairy tale, but

it is also true, though I didn't remember it until I fell down on those stones." He raised his injured hand. "It's only a little thing, of course, but it was enough. You know, Peter . . ." As he leaned forward, his shadow traveled up the wall until its head fell over the top. ". . . complexity is unhappiness and damnation too, and the race of man is unhappy and damned because it is complicated. If only it might be replaced by the race of children! Then there would be simplicity again, and happiness and salvation.

"Oh Peter, I will never marry man again to woman, but only child to child! Happiness is a wedding of children."

"That's a lovely parable," said Cowley.

"I didn't mean it as a parable."

"Then I don't know how you meant it, but I think I know in general what you mean."

Dr. Lavender saw immediately, once Cowley began to interpret his words to him, that he was not interpreting them aright, and, once that was ascertained, he continued to look at his friend and, in very general terms, to think about him, but he stopped listening altogether to what he said. He was unaware, therefore, that, although Cowley went on speaking of ideas which he conscientiously believed to be Lavender's, ideas of happiness and damnation, salvation and sorrow, he was actually speaking now of what he himself believed, of his own intentions, and this was a rare occupation for Cowley. No one heard him, for certainly Lavender did not and there was no one else about, as he spoke on of what concerned him most; but eloquence was never among his gifts, and few would have thought themselves the poorer for

having missed what amounted to his soliloquy as he sat there in the sun against the stone wall. He did not speak well, not even, perhaps, convincingly, for the profound sincerity of his thought emerged in the ponderous dress of truism.

It would have been strange for those who admired him most to have been told, as they were prevented by their admiration from realizing for themselves, that Cowley was not only not gifted in his speech, but not even particularly perceptive. And he was not perceptive largely because it would have been unwise for him to be. His was a zealousness of purpose from which he could not well afford to be diverted by subtleties of thought and expression any more than by those minutiae of sentiment and compassion which he never consciously avoided but which simply did not occur to him. He had for instance felt genuine alarm when he had seen Lavender lying there among the stones where he had fallen, but it had lasted only a very little time, and there had been no accompanying sense of grief at the sight of an old man undone so grotesquely, a sight which, on the other hand, had not failed to move even Rufus. His sentiment and compassion were rather of a vast and general sort, as general as were the banalities with which he frequently expressed them, and the sort necessary for carrying him over great distances of purpose comparatively undistracted. Whereas Lavender, with his occasional teary clairvoyance, his moments of passionate insight, tended constantly to mire himself in a slough of poignant specifics—a sullit garden, the sudden reappearance of a friend, the games and laughter of children—Cowley was able to pass these by relatively unaffected and yet was, when

moved, moved more completely even than Lavender because over a larger area, as it were, more generally and less particularly. If Lavender had wept at, and Cowley ignored, Sam's mildly jesting reference to Fendall as the ugliest one, Cowley nonetheless spoke now with great feeling of matters which Lavender heeded not at all.

Surely, he began, it was not a happy world, as Lavender had said, no, not a happy one, and it seemed strange to him how few there were, even among the particularly unhappy, who would declare that this was so; it seemed strange, or so he said, how much they *would* declare about the world, but never this. He repeated the assertion three times in ways differing only very slightly one from another, tediously, as a man speaks who is in love, until the words "happy" and "world" grew even more than usually meaningless. But it did not matter, for there was no one to hear him, with the sun itself as likely a listener as Lavender, the children gone, and the house shut off behind a wall. They would readily say the world was coming to an end, he said, that it had been for years mismanaged, and by whom, when, why, but seldom, scarcely ever, would they say it was a sad world. It was, Cowley continued, like a party; for here he was drawn by the demands of the silence with which his observations were greeted, into talking beyond where he would ordinarily have stopped and into what was for him the unfamiliar air of metaphor. It was like a party, he said, where, although no one was really enjoying himself, no one would quite say it was not a *good* party. And this was very sad, he went on, and it would have been difficult for any who heard him to

deny that he apparently felt, and truly felt, that sadness. To this extent he was successful in his little speech, yet then he stopped speaking altogether. In his stomach now more than in his mind, he continued in silence with those emotions to which, within himself, if nowhere else, he had given rise. There was an elation and an uneasiness, more in his bowels than in his thoughts, that rose through his chest and into his throat, where they became an obstruction much like the one that frequently precedes tears. But Cowley did not, like Lavender, cry easily, nor did he now. He merely seemed with the irrelevance of his smile to have forgotten completely where he was and to remember instead, and in vivid defiance of his present context, what it had been to see and come to know, not imperfectly and through faith as with most men, but specifically and with brilliance, that there was something which, as Lavender had remarked earlier, had taken him by the hand, and which, if it did not immediately solve such a problem as the unhappiness of an entire world, solved it at least for him, and suggested the wider solution. If, as he had announced earlier on the beach to the incredulous amusement of some and the unadmitted disappointment and annoyance of others, he had not, after all, seen *God* beneath that apple tree where the late afternoon sun had shone crazily and broken through the many-angled branches, he had nonetheless seen—and to this extent Lundrigan had told him the truth—something or someone with whom the very inanity of his smile as he remembered it testified that he had fallen, with candor and completeness, in love.

Cowley had not, to this degree, been in love before although

it is doubtful whether he would have mentioned that fact had he been speaking instead of thinking or, more accurately, had he been thinking instead of merely loving, restively, mysteriously, yet not vaguely, as he sat there beside his friend. Yet had Lavender prodded him with the little stick he now held in his wounded hand and put the question to him, Cowley would undoubtedly have been surprised into admitting that this was, although he had hitherto not thought of it, quite true. He had not, he would have said then, been in love before. Frequently, when sitting in trains or stations or any other crowded, public place, alone, for it was an occupation of solitude, he set himself the curious exercise of looking from person to person about him and trying ingenuously and passionately to love, to the momentary exclusion of all others, those especially upon whom he found it most difficult, for one reason or another, to look for long; but these attempts led him to an emotion which, though somewhat similar to the one he felt now, was significantly different for the reason that it was, at its richest, the result of the greatest *endeavor*—the fierce endeavor necessary to create, out of loneliness and charity, love for those very strangers who, in their ugliness, their hardness, their meagre and arrogant complacency, reading their newspapers or staring through dusty windows or down at the pavement before them, seemed to need or desire it least. What he felt now, on the other hand, the pond not far out before him, the wall warm against his back, was, rather, resplendent in the effortlessness with which he felt it.

For an instant of indescribably pervasive agony he re-

membered again that doubt which Lundrigan had suggested as to the nature of his vision. Then he managed to shut its glaring from him, yet not so completely but that it left, as the sun leaves when one has looked at it too long, its glowing and insistent outline bright against the gentle darkness of the mind.

"Two schoolteachers sitting by a wall," said Dr. Lavender. He broke his stick in two and threw one piece towards a tree which it missed. If the other also missed, he thought, it would mean that he was to die within the year. And he threw it then but was prevented from observing the result by what seemed suddenly to occur to him. "It's a matter of loving and dying," he said. "Teaching is always raw and lacerating, and we get only rolls of sticking plaster during the summer. I wish I believed more in myself . . ." Had it, he wondered, hit the tree? He could not tell. ". . . but if I did, I'd pretend I was the devil or God. I know I'm neither."

Cowley only smiled in answer.

An orange kitten stepped delicately through a gate in the wall and stood near a little circle of dandelions, completely motionless except for the tip of its tail. For a moment it stared with curiosity at the two men and then raised one paw and, with quick nods of its head, started to lick it. In another moment, Sara appeared. She was carrying a camera and exclaimed in mild surprise at finding herself no longer alone. Picking up the kitten, she pressed it to her cheek, where it grew all confused with her rather untidy black hair and opened its pink mouth remarkably wide in yawn or protest as Sara pressed it closer still. The extravagant noises

she made were half to the kitten, half to Lavender and Cowley. They must sit down again, she said, since they had risen at her entrance, and she would take their photograph. There was nothing more she could do in her studio until the model arrived in a few hours, and this was a way, she said, of passing the time until then. They sat down.

There now, she went on, that would never do, for their pose was as stiff as a collar; they must go on discussing whatever they had been discussing and forget that she was there at all. This was essential for a good photograph. She had for instance—and she aimed the camera at them as she spoke—managed to get a lovely one of Sam picking his nose as he read on the terrace. Dr. Lavender gave his helpless laugh with the frowning lines deep between his eyes, Cowley squinted into the sun, leaning slightly forward so that his shadow overlapped Lavender's, and Sara, watching all of this in the little oval of glass, watching Peter in particular, snapped the shutter just as Lavender's smile began to fade. Oh she *did* hope it was a good one, she said, but what she did not say, not even to herself, was that she hoped, hoped very much, that it was a good one of Cowley.

Chapter Nine

PETER ran from them through the slow July evening across the grass and skirting the paths lest the sound of the pebbles betray his direction. Those he fled stood in a group about the little fountain with their eyes closed while one of them, Tom perhaps, or Sam, as though numbering the stars they could not see or the crickets that puzzled the dusk with declensions of their misgiving, counted low and unhurriedly towards one hundred. He knew that they would, of course, find him at last once the chase had begun, yet he fled them with all the lonely passion of believing, or almost believing, that this would never be.

The conventions were unusual ones since at the beginning there was only one outcast, one hunted, whom the others, the hunters, set out with zeal to find. And yet, as one by one they succeeded in their purpose, they did not, in their triumph, expose him to their fellow hunters but became instead the hunted with him until, finally, by a curious reversal of standard, it was the one still left free, the lone pursuer, who knew defeat. So Peter, with difficult foreknowledge of

this ritual, was obliged both to hide so as, theoretically, never, never to be found, yet also to choose some sanctuary where, once, contrarily, inevitably, they *did* find him, he might have space to welcome them as brothers in hiding. Tomorrow? Was it still to be tomorrow, Peter, Sara had asked him. Fendall had stood nearby with a firefly trapped in his handkerchief, listening, yet watching the little exclamations of light soft through the cotton. Yes, Peter had answered, returning her smile, tomorrow, whereupon they had all closed their eyes upon him. And now the blood in his chest and head pulsed with the memory of his running as he stood still for a moment, without much more time, searching the garden.

Two tall stone urns bearing ivy stood at the corner of a jutting porch wall, and on his hands and knees he crept behind them where he found a roughly triangular recess stretching back beneath the porch and portaled with the urns themselves. With his hands upon the heavy curve of their flanks he crouched there, a tendril of ivy awakening his fingers, and in the distance heard the cry of one hundred. Then it was still again, and he leaned his cheek against the cold and porous stone so that it was almost as if he embraced what barred the outside from him. He had heard Sara question tomorrow, and he had confirmed it, smiling even, and seeming always secure in his understanding of what it was to mean for him, for her, for all who would partake of it; but in his solitude, with the chill of the stone to deepen his knowledge, he came to know well that, although he fully loved, he did not fully understand. If any one of them had ever asked,

as no one ever had, fearing either that he could or could not easily answer, what it was that had been required of him by what he had seen, he could have replied only that it had required love of him, and that this love had, in its turn, required its own dissemination. Or so he had believed, and belief had been easy through all the brightness and splendor with which it had originally come to him. But now, in an agony of doubt, he wondered at what appeared suddenly to be a plan designed very much by himself and no one, nothing else. Love was not easily taught. If only, he thought, the urn might shield and keep him always there.

"Put your shoes on!" Through the thickening dusk Daisy appeared barefoot around the side of the house and had stooped to look beneath a boxwood hedge when her brother spoke with ruthless authority. She pretended not to have heard or not to have understood but stood up to look at him, leaving her search unfinished. "You heard me," he warned. "And pull your top up. It's disgusting to always go around that way." She pulled the elastic top of her dress up closer beneath her arms and had started to plead that she did not know where she had left her shoes when George Bundle joined them, and Timmy, embarrassed to seem concerned with any such matter as his sister's appearance, pursued the subject no further but only pinched her that she might know he would return to it later when they were alone; unless he forgot, of course. And that was unlikely he implied with the pressure of his fingers which left two small red circles on her upper arm.

"He's gone into the woods . . ." said George with breathless urgency.

"Well, what are we waiting for then!" Timmy began to run in that direction, and his friend went after him. Daisy followed some distance behind. "The woods!" she called to someone as she disappeared.

"I don't think so," came the answer after so long a lapse that it was doubtful whether Daisy was near enough by then to hear it. "He might, of course," Sara continued, walking slowly and alone past the porch, "but somehow I doubt it." She spoke in the curious tones of one who calls into a dark room that may or may not be empty. "Peter, be a dear," she whispered, "and tell me where you are because I'm sure that you're not very far away. Peter?" She leaned against the porch railing vined with honeysuckle and looked out through what was almost darkness now. Except for the crickets and her own breathing, there was no other sound. "It's terrible to talk and not be sure there's anyone around to listen—just like praying really."

She spoke in less, almost, than a whisper, and yet she could be heard. "I pray you, Peter, if you *are* here . . . or are you in the woods, up in their tree-house there (they don't think I know about it) eating an apple or eating your Bible, thinking you're safe but not actually being safe because there's a patrol heading in that direction I know because I just met them on their way, and if you put all their ages together they still wouldn't add up to mine . . . so you'd really better watch out. Lundrigan says the younger they

are the more dangerous, and that he's quite afraid of them. But not so afraid of them as he is of you, although he'd never admit it of course. We're all a little afraid of you, Peter, and I'm a little afraid that maybe you're not here, or maybe I'm afraid that you are.

"Oh Peter, our Peter, who art in the boxwood maybe, swallowed be my shame, thy cousin Sara's come, thou wilt be found, behind those hedges or in some other place. Lead me not into the woods among the high trees where I don't think you are, but deliver me here. Amen." She started to walk along behind the hedge, ceasing to speak from time to time as she bent down to make sure he was not lying beneath it.

"Peter? Do you know what Dr. Lavender said to me while we were standing there with our eyes closed and Sam was counting? I didn't think I'd heard him clearly, so I asked him again, and he repeated the same thing. 'I said Peter's in love,' he said.

"And what was I to make of that? I opened my eyes and asked him what he meant, but he didn't open his, and didn't seem to hear me either. I think Dick Lundrigan heard though, because he said he'd known it all along and was surprised I didn't. Sam was counting, and Julie was standing over with the children, so nobody else was involved. But was it true, I wondered. That you were in love, I mean.

"Well, in love, perhaps, but certainly not in here." She had come to the end of the hedge and remained there for a few moments before noticing the urns by the corner of the porch wall. Instead of going towards them, however, she

started to walk in the other direction, and Peter, although at one moment he had nearly risen from his knees and called out to her, simply watched until at last the whiteness of her dress was absorbed into the night. Goodbye, he said quietly to himself then, Good night, good cousin, and then he did rise for a little until the sound of someone whistling drove him down again. An unidentifiable figure appeared, still whistling, and started to search the hedge much as had Sara. It was in fact kneeling there when a second figure, limping slightly, walked up unnoticed behind it, stopped short, and then spoke.

"I've found you." This was said with curious gravity and in such soft tones that the whistler seemed in no way startled but replied with almost equal composure.

"True." He paused. "But are you sure I'm the one you were looking for?"

Instead of an answer there came a vague laugh and only then a "no" so inconclusive and uncertain that it was as if it belonged to a different context altogether. "No," the voice had continued in the darkness, "you don't find a thing by looking for it. Sometimes . . ." the speaker started to walk away as a new and nearby chorus of crickets seemed suddenly to join the others, "sometimes not even by looking *at* it." He explained then, in answer to a question, that this limp came as the result of a very slight fall, scarcely a fall at all, he insisted, and that he was not in the habit of walking any more rapidly than it allowed him to anyway. And then, having said something unintelligible about the pond and appearing eager to depart, he proceeded in roughly that direction

himself. No sooner was he gone than his companion, no longer whistling, went directly to the urns and crawled behind them.

"Peter?" he asked.

"Sam?" Through the night they recognized one another, and Sam seated himself beside his cousin.

"I'm the first then?"

"Yes."

Sam continued, speaking always in a whisper lest the sound of his voice betray them, and yet with a degree of excitement rare for him, about the game in which they found themselves involved. Indeed it seemed to be no more than the game itself that excited him, for he described in some detail to Peter the wanderings, as he had observed them, of the other players. Lundrigan, he said, had remained searching the area around the fountain whence they had all started, under the assumption that Peter was clever enough, as Lundrigan insisted that he himself would have been, to choose that place, obvious though it was, as the very last one which they might think to examine. All of which went to prove, Sam remarked, the hazards of believing, as fully as did Lundrigan by his own frequent admission, in the concept of the "mature mind" (Lundrigan's own phrase) as the most trustworthy, the most moral and the most generally efficacious guide to living. The difficulty, Sam went on, was that you were constantly, as in this, being either confused or altogether misled by coming up against other minds that were simply not as mature as your own—if Peter would excuse him, that was. They both laughed. So that was how Lundrigan was occupied, or had

been when last seen. Julie, on the other hand, he continued, having found herself a forked apple branch, had gone off swearing that if *she* were to find the proper spot, it would be only with the aid of a divining-rod. And then Rufus Este and Harry Fogg . . . Sam paused. Did Peter know, by the way, what the other children called them, what they called themselves apparently, the *Uglies*? Whatever that was all about. Well, the *Uglies* then, he proceeded with a delicate grimace felt rather than seen through the darkness, had had an idea of their own. By walking backwards, they had argued, they would deceive Mr. Cowley into thinking that they were leaving rather than approaching his place of concealment, and that would of course put him off his guard and make their success all the more probable. Sam did not account for Dr. Lavender, imagining that Peter had overheard their recent conversation, but said simply that of Sara's course he was not certain since she had disappeared by herself and without announcing her intentions to anyone.

"As for me," he concluded, "it's curious, but I was convinced from the very beginning that you would be right here. Probably because it's the exact spot I would have chosen had I been you. So at least we have *that* in common, Peter." He laughed. "If nothing else."

It was, all in all, perhaps the longest single speech that Sam had ever addressed wholly to him, and although it was explained at least partially by their inability to see one another which made conversation between them in general less difficult, and although its subject was scarcely one of importance to either of them, Peter was nonetheless moved

by it, and moved as he seldom was by occasions so slight. It was Sam's final statement that brought at last an answer from him.

"No," he said, "there sure doesn't seem to be much, much we have in common, I mean. Still, though, there's no way of telling how much there might be because I know you so little, Sam. I hardly know you at all." The rarity of his attempt, an attempt only to *know* and for the sake alone of knowing, a sudden, brief willingness to be diverted from a purpose not commonly so lenient, would almost surely have met elsewhere with the encouragement of a reply; but from Sam, with no intended unkindness, but with all the characteristic restraint and courtly diffidence that permitted him to live always unchanged, for better or for worse, by the intrusions of such circumstance as Cowley's question and the response it might otherwise have occasioned, from Sam it elicited no more than a complexity of silence. He replied nothing; and hence Peter, half fearing that he had somehow offended his cousin, half simply overcome, as earlier that day with Dr. Lavender, by the demands of a silence too heavy to bear silently, found himself speaking as Sam was unwilling or unable to do. Furthermore, and again as with Lavender, he found himself drawn into the indirections of a metaphor and one which, by the accident of its nature, so distracted Sam into considerations of his own that he heard little beyond the very beginnings of what was being said to him.

A generous father gave a gift to his son, and there was nothing—Peter let his fingers come to rest lightly upon the earth as he spoke—nothing strange in that, nor was it an

act that would be questioned by the son or any other witness. The gift was given, as it was received, kindly and as the emblem of a relationship whose very nature anticipated such kindnesses as no more than natural and right.

It was precisely here that Sam ceased to listen. When last he had seen him, Fendall, the firefly still trapped in his handkerchief, had been running to join the other children, saw them disappear around the side of the house without him, looked back for an instant at his father, an oddly searching instant as Sam remembered it, and then ran after them, calling. You gave, after all, life to your son, Sam thought, and a little frown at the banality of his conjecture briefly contracted his brows, passing only when he realized that it had been suggested by the banality of his cousin's digression, whatever its meaning. You gave life, after all, and that was, was it not, a good deal? Even Peter might be expected to agree. And then, of course, you gave the other, lesser, nameless things too. For a moment he pondered the nature of these, but instead of pursuing them to whatever might have been his conclusion, instead of perhaps trying to name them to himself if no other, he was reminded of those who were fathers among that collection of seventeenth-century writings he so cherished. One of these, Sir Thomas Browne, in a letter to his son describing a stork that had come to perch one day on his rooftop, had remarked that it was "the tamest stately thing that ever you saw," and Sam was possessed entirely, as Peter continued, by what he considered the extraordinary pathos and force of this fragment.

But supposing, Peter said, that the gift was of a nature, or

for a use, that the son was unable to comprehend, what then? Love it as he still would and grateful as he would nevertheless continue to be towards the father who had given it, how bitter the cup of not knowing why it had been given, for what it was intended. There it was, lovely and bright in his hands, crying out to be shared, but what if he did not understand it? What, most bitter of all, if he did not use it rightly? But before Peter had the chance to answer his own questions, if indeed he found that possible, the sound of voices somewhere near them in the night enforced his silence.

“But Rufus, didn’t you think she was . . .”

“Yes!” Rufus gave an incredulous little laugh at his friend’s persistence. “Yes. I thought she was very beautiful. I told you that.”

“Yes, but still,” Harry continued. “And just her name!”

“Mollie what?”

“Mollie Purdue.” There was a pause.

“Do you think he’s around here somewhere?”

Harry shook his head. “Was she embarrassed, do you think, when we found her—the way we found her, I mean? Not that she could blame us, of course. We didn’t know.”

“No,” Rufus replied in the tone, which momentarily set him off from his companion, of having considered the question rationally earlier. “After all, they’re used to it.”

“But even so. I mean two Uglies, without warning, and for the first time!”

“Ugh! I’d forgotten that.” They both laughed.

“But she did say she’d help us,” Harry bent down to speak more softly to Rufus, who had seated himself on the porch

stairs, "with tomorrow." Rufus silenced him with an exaggerated hush, and they sat there for some time, unaware of the other pair concealed not far from them, saying nothing. From the direction of the pond came the occasional, gruff approbation of frogs.

"It was so awful," said Rufus suddenly, as though continuing with a conversation in which they had been long and wordlessly engaged with one another. "You know how sometimes you feel you've been so really clever and have made such a hit with people? Well, I had been talking to some friends of my mother's, and everything I said seemed to strike them as brilliantly amusing because they laughed their heads almost off at even the silliest joke I happened to make, and I was sure I'd never been such a success. They kept looking at me and then at each other, laughing, and as if to say what a bright one that little Este is. You know. I had *such* a good time." He waited for a moment to hear the appreciative, understanding noises Harry was making.

"Well," his voice trembled with amusement even as he spoke, "it wasn't till I'd left the room that I discovered my pants had been unbuttoned the whole time.

"So sad!" he concluded, and laughed once more to show how sad.

"Oh terribly sad," agreed Harry, laughing too, "and just the kind of thing that happens—to an Ugly, I mean."

"When he's trying to mix with People. It never works."

"Yes. Rufus, did you really think she was . . . I won't ask. But you don't think she was laughing at me do you, Mollie, the way you say they laughed at you?"

"No, I don't," he answered, with amused compassion. "And she didn't have anything to laugh at anyway because certainly *you* weren't the one who was unbuttoned. And, after all, she did say she'd help," he lowered his voice to a mock whisper, "with tomorrow." For a time there was silence between them.

"We once said Uglies were lonely," Harry spoke more to himself, it seemed, than to his companion, "yet they fall in love sometimes, and that shouldn't be lonely. It should be just the opposite really, shouldn't it?"

"Except that Uglies aren't fallen in love with; because people don't, you know. You forgot that, Harry. That's part of it too."

"Then do you mean," Harry spoke slowly, as if listening himself to what he was saying, "do you mean we spend our whole lives wandering around and having that happen to us—falling in love and not being fallen in love with? Oh that's almost too ugly, I think. I think maybe that's the saddest thing I've ever heard."

"It's very sad," Rufus replied, and was about to add something further when circumstances prevented him. They would always, the Uglies, have at least one another, he had been about to say, and that, though never in any sense love of course, was still something; they could always, he had come close to suggesting, meet again after years of separate wandering and talk over at length then the varieties of their unsuccess with all the dispassion of old men for whom anything like lust was no longer either a threat or a promise. Rufus would have recognized the simile as not his own.

“For God’s sake, go out in the fresh air and *enjoy yourselves!*” Mrs. Dunn had once cried out to them, passing by their room. “You’ll be old before your time, always sitting with your heads together. In fact you’re already, I swear, like two little old men!” And so it was Sara who had originally defined them thus, and although they had scorned her for it at first, excusing her only on the unflattering grounds that she had drunk too many cocktails at the time, they came later to accept, even to approve, what she had said. There was indeed, they had agreed, something of old men about them and, had Rufus been able, he would have spoken in those terms now. There was, of course, something of children about them too, and although with this they would *not* have agreed, it gave them, as is often the case, the semblance of an age even greater still. But the sudden appearance of Julie McMoon prevented Rufus from consoling his friend in the manner that had occurred to him, and together they sat as silently and still as the night itself so as not to be detected. What happened then or, rather, why it happened, became a subject for unending speculation among all those who came eventually to hear of it, nor was any one of them ever entirely convinced that the mystery had been explained to his satisfaction.

Julie had appeared, still carrying her forked apple branch, but loosely now so that the points of it trailed along the grass as she walked, and searched for Cowley, as had her several predecessors, along the boxwood hedge. Failing, needless to say, to find him there, she had started to go on in another direction altogether when she suddenly caught sight

of the two large urns by the porch. With a quick exclamation of something more, perhaps, than mere surprise, she had stood perfectly still for a few moments and looked towards them with such singular intensity that, in the process, she let the apple branch fall from her hand as though forgetting the very fact that she held it at all. It is true that through a clouded and nearly moonless night the urns of porous gray stone appeared more ponderous and of greater significance than actually they were, took on a rather startling, an almost funerary appearance, and this was ventured by some later as a possible explanation of part at least of what soon happened; but an equal number of others denied its relevance if for no better reason than that it seemed to them utterly impossible for anyone to have proceeded as she did with fear alone a motive, and especially impossible, although they never phrased this, for anyone who, like Julie, had a way of talking through her nose, and whom, for that reason alone, foolish as it might sound, they could simply never imagine as becoming so frightened as her actions might otherwise have suggested she had. At any rate, whatever her motive, she did not stand there much longer before speaking, and yet, when she spoke, so softly that one could barely hear her words.

“Then you’ve been there always, and I never knew. . . .” She said this as gently almost as the gentlest reprimand, and yet as if it were forgiveness too. Then she approached the urns, slowly, frightened, or simply not certain, and knelt down to look between them.

Sam had crept forward so that his body concealed Peter

behind him, and when he saw Julie's thin face peering through the darkness at him, her eyes so large and querulous, he spoke seriously although it was as a kind of jest that he intended it.

"He has gone away, my dear," he said. "He was here, but he is here no longer. I am truly sorry."

It was then that Julie did what resulted in so much conjecture later, for instead of laughing and insisting that she be permitted to look behind him, instead of merely entering, she started suddenly to weep.

"Oh where have you put him then?" she asked through the obstruction of her tears. "Where has he gone?" And for a while there was no sound but the crickets and her crying until finally Sam, too surprised to reply himself, moved slightly aside so that it was just possible to make out the white of Peter's shirt where he leaned against the side of the porch, and left to him the burden of speech.

"Why are you weeping?" Peter asked, and with such demanding simplicity that even through her grief Julie heard him.

"Because he has gone away," she said, "and I don't know where to find him."

"But I'm here." Peter came to her. "I've been here all the time," he said, "if it's me you mean. If I'm the one you mean, I'm here. Don't cry, don't cry," and he put his hand upon her lightly freckled arm. Her tears were particularly painful to the four who heard them, for none of them had ever seen her cry before. After a little time she stopped.

It was not long before Lundrigan, Sara and, somewhat

later, the other children, attracted by the sound of voices, joined the three of them, and since Peter had forgotten in his concern to hide any longer, the game was virtually ended. Only Dr. Lavender failed to appear, and George Bundle explained that he was hardly surprised at this because the last time he had seen him, he had been wandering without apparent direction through the woods. That he was almost certainly lost for good by this time, George found it both impossible and unmanly to deny, and he only hoped that the notorious tramps, who got murderously drunk at night on the liquid heat that other people used in their picnic stoves, were asleep and would not notice him as he passed them by. He had almost warned him, he said, but then he had found a pebble in his shoe, and the inconvenience of that had put it out of his head altogether. What might otherwise have been his elders' concern at this news was, except that they did distractedly ask the boys to go look for him, almost entirely forgotten in face of the more immediate and obscure dilemma of Julie.

Although she had stopped weeping by the time Sara and Lundrigan found her, it became quickly apparent to them by a number of signs, both from Julie and from the two who stood by her, that it was not long since she had been, and their first attempt was to keep this discovery from the children by declaring the game over and suggesting that a search be made for Dr. Lavender. Rufus Este and Harry Fogg had by now come out of hiding themselves, affecting to have seen and heard nothing, and they were sent into the house with Daisy and Ellie Sonntag to prepare a pitcher of lemon-

ade which they might all enjoy before separating for the night. There was, once this had been accomplished, despairingly little left for those who remained with Julie to do. They were all unwilling, of course, to question her directly, and she in turn did no more by way of explanation than to repeat how foolish she had been, to ask nasally, neither expecting nor desiring an answer, what they must think of her, and to seem finally to have forgotten the entire matter and to be troubled instead by no more than the lateness of the hour and the need to take her children home and to bed. Sam, who considered himself the original and unwitting offender, said little, Peter said even less, and in a short time, what with Dr. Lavender's having been found sitting uninjured and apparently unaware of his predicament beneath a large maple tree, and the children reassembled, the three McMoons made their departure with Lundrigan, and the incident was brought to an end. Not so, however, the speculations to which the incident had given rise.

It was Sara who suggested that Julie's actions might somehow have resulted from a sudden and exceptionally poignant recollection, occasioned perhaps by the funereal appearance of the urns, of her husband's death and the unhappy manner of it, and that it was possibly he whom she had expected to find awaiting her with gentle apology and consolation behind them. Sam, although he admitted the possibility of this, denied that it was very probable since Julie had, after all, apparently survived a number of years without any such occurrence, and she was scarcely a person given to hallucination anyway. But then, Sara had persisted, she was scarcely a

person given to bursting into tears for no reason at all either, and what could Sam offer as an alternative? Simply, he had said, although with a conviction insufficient to persuade his listeners, that she was, more than anything else, tired. After having searched long and diligently for Peter, a prey to all the fatigues, physical and emotional, involved with candid participation in such a chase, she had come at last upon the place where, beyond any doubt, he lay, and only then to be told, as a clumsy if innocent jest, that he was no longer there. There was a kind of hopelessness, an injustice, implicit in such a reception that none would have been surprised to see elicit tears from a child; and why then, he had asked, was it surprising to see someone longer and more intimately acquainted than any child with injustice, with hopelessness, fall victim to it? If ever, as in playing one of their games, you tacitly agreed to accept the terms of a children's world, terms permitting, among other things, greater emotional extravagance than most, who was to say where your acceptance might easily stop? For Julie it had stopped on just the other side of baffled, despairing tears, and there, Sam had said, was an end to it.

Lundrigan's opinion, expressed privately to the Dunns on the following morning, was that the fault lay largely with Peter. You did not, he had said briskly then, his back turned towards them, set people to thinking about visions of the Almighty, or of anyone else for that matter, without inevitably setting a great many other fantastic conjectures in motion too; and there was, what was more, a kind of immature irresponsibility in doing so. Who could know, in the

last analysis, exactly *what* had been in Julie's mind at the time, but who, on the other hand, could have any doubt as to *why* it had been there? Every one of them, he had ventured to say, was to some degree unsettled by the implications of what Cowley had seen fit to promise them, for what serious-thinking person would not be? But at least, he had concluded, they would soon be at rest again because this was, was it not, the Day? He had turned then and looked at them through the morning light.

"They know they would be happy if it weren't for us, if there was no one in this lovely world but them. I'm not one of them, I know, and Mrs. McMoon, although she played their game, isn't one of them either. And they have ways of reminding us of that. Tears are only one of their ways, I think. We understand." Such had been Dr. Lavender's one comment on the affair, and since he had delivered it at a time when Peter was out of the room, there was no one there who had any way of knowing what he meant.

It was Peter who had had the least to say. He had sat with the Dunns and Dr. Lavender for a little time after the others had departed, and listened to their varied explanations with interest and apparent sympathy but seemed in general less disturbed, or disturbed less specifically, than they. He had added almost nothing to the discussion himself, for he neither offered his opinions freely nor was he pressed by his friends to explain; indeed, no words were addressed to him directly at all until the very end of the evening. They had risen to take leave of one another when Sam, thinking about their game and the unhappy abruptness of its conclusion, about

searching and not finding, or finding yet without success, about love perhaps, or loneliness, had gone over to his cousin and put his hand for a moment on his shoulder. "Maybe there are more than just two Uglies in the world, Peter," he had said, smiling, his hand on the door-knob. "I don't know how many more, but there are almost certainly more than two. Or what do you think, Peter?" and then, without waiting for an answer, he had left the room and gone upstairs to bed.

Chapter Ten

ON HER train from the city, Mollie Purdue had had some difficulty with the conductor. Having searched unsuccessfully through her purse for a scrap of paper in which to wrap her discarded chewing-gum, she had at last absent-mindedly used her ticket check for that tidy purpose, and only some time later, after the stout man in uniform had been waiting for several impatient minutes at her side, had she discovered her error. It became necessary then to detach the two substances which, in the heat of the summer day, had become almost as one, and her success, although remarkable under the circumstances, went largely unnoticed by the conductor, who had in a sense inspired it. He expressed himself disagreeably and in tones sufficiently loud to attract the attention of every other passenger in the car.

If there are some people who, over the course of twenty-five years or so, develop what is commonly called a certain power of observation, there are others, fewer perhaps in number, who emerge with an equally certain power of being observed, and of these last Mollie Purdue had for some time

been one. Not only did she have considerable innate abilities in that direction, but her work as an artist's model had obliged her to develop them, and seldom did they do her fairer service than in this encounter on the train. She was in no way disconcerted by either the irascible stare of the uniform or by the vulgar and dispassionately curious gaze of the other passengers, yet conducted herself under their separate observations in the very ways most likely to satisfy their contrary demands. Whereas to the conductor she managed to appear all apology and confusion, her fellow travelers were gratified to perceive in her proud manner of bearing her blonde head with its small black beret, in the fluency with which her hands explained what her bright eyes did no more than ironically suggest, just that degree of defiance—unanswerable yet not quite raucous—which they felt they themselves would have shown, or would so like to have shown, in the same situation. Nor did the incident depress Mollie, becoming, as it might for a more sensitive mind have become, an ugly omen, an acid disfiguring the entire complexion of her stay with the Dunns. It simply happened, and although it was the conductor who finally apologized, and the passengers who would have risen from their seats to destroy him had he not, she came away from it as unconcerned with her triumph as she would have been with her defeat. Sara had met her at the station, and together they drove back to the Dunns' house.

There had been time for little more than a rapid lunch, during which Mollie briefly met Peter and Dr. Lavender, who had been finishing their dessert in silence when she arrived,

before Sara declared herself eager to get to work, and the two of them had descended to the room which Sara was pleased to think of as her secret. Through the glass slits in the ceiling had fallen a slow, diffuse light that made the room seem to have originally been a chapel more plausibly than a smugglers' cache, and there they had remained, Mollie standing unclothed where the sun lay brightest and Sara troubling the beginnings of her likeness into clay, except for a period of something less than an hour when Sara had been called away by some household concern. It was during this interval that Mollie, sitting lightly covered with the copious white shawl that Sara had provided her, had been secretly and accidentally visited by two of the children. She told Sara nothing of this encounter nor of what had passed between them then.

Later she had been asked, of course, to join in the game of Sardines that had been arranged for the evening, but, thinking it a joke or an obscure and thereby questionable euphemism, she had laughed with a kind of enlightened merriment at the invitation, phrased, as it happened, by Sam, and then firmly, but with good humor, refused it. There were games she played and games she did not play, avoiding always, with what was, in her case, understandable caution, any of whose specific nature she was not well informed in advance. And then, to give added weight to her refusal, there was no doubt but that it had been a long day for her, and consequently, despite the fact that Sara had told her she would not be obliged to pose on the following afternoon since there was, she had paused, an appointment she could not easily

break, Mollie had said goodnight to her hosts and was able to retire at a rather early hour to her room. From the french windows there she had gazed down through the dusk for a while upon the various searchings for Peter, but at just that point when she might, had she remained, have beheld some part of the curious scene involving Julie, she had left the window for her bath.

The game had ended by the time she returned, and she stood in the darkness looking out once more into the emptiness of the night towards the pond and the wood behind it. She wore nothing except, again, the white shawl of Sara's, and she held that about her, keeping it in place by pressing a soft fist of it against her breast, not because the mildness of the night air required of her any such defense, but simply because she felt it too beautiful to disregard. It was embroidered, white against white, with little moons and stars, and a weight of fringe, long enough just to touch the carpet at her heels, brushed so gently as to be almost imperceptible against her knees, fell in a grace of silken filament across her wrist. After a few minutes of unthinking delight at simply being there, of amusement almost at knowing more fully than anyone else in all the world could know just how her nakedness was fragrant and still faintly flushed from the bath yet cool too, and the ends of her short, blonde hair damp but never cold against her cheek and the back of her neck, she realized with a quick pang that she was not only all of this, and more, but also, and above all things as she suddenly saw it, alone, alone and unobserved. A brief but fiercely whispered curse at all beauty that had ever, since time began, been

squandered on solitude, set trembling the square of darkness her window cut from the vacant night, and then with a high petulance she let her shawl slip from her shoulders to the floor as though out of flaunting what was most desirable, there might, miraculously, come someone to desire it. But if indeed that had been Mollie's fanciful hope, its duration was apparently no longer than the instant necessary for her generally unfanciful nature to recognize its hopelessness, since in another instant she had knelt down to retrieve it. She threw it over the back of a chair that stood near the open window where the moonlight fell upon each embroidered fold and counterfold and enriched it beyond any other object in the room except perhaps for Mollie herself, who stood for the partial definition of a moment beside it. Then with a little wanton laugh at simply being thwarted, or at finding herself among such people as these who were content, on such an evening as this, to play some game named for a fish, she retreated into the shadow and, dropping lightly down upon her bed, pulled one thin coverlet over her and closed her eyes to a situation for which, characteristically, she felt more amusement than irritation.

In their bedroom a floor above Mollie's, Rufus Este was already fast asleep, but Harry Fogg lay, as for some hours he had been lying, irreparably awake in a bed that had become for him a whole agonizing world with every detail, however minute, of whose geography he was desperately aware, a world which had come by this time to have more reality about it for him than any other. There was no province of cool sheet nor any obscure suburb of pillow that he had not

searched for sleep, until at last, the pillow discarded and the upper sheet thrown back, he lay with his face pressed into the mattress and one arm bent unnaturally beneath him so that the hand hung over the bed's edge, and in every fingertip he could feel the muffled insistence of his pulse. He no longer noticed Rufus's breathing nor any other sound save those of his mind as it alternately deafened him or made him strain to hear; as it lost all power to differentiate between abstract and concrete, between the metaphysics of an uncomfortably twisted shoulder and the perspiring stuffiness of recollection. There was no part of his life, he felt, that he had not by then remembered and again remembered, no nearly forgotten triumph that had not risen once more to delight him and no indiscretion so remote that it was beyond making him blush with humiliation a second or third time, but these, for all their momentary brightness, disappeared quickly like the fiery bubbles of a roman candle, and it was rather the immediate past that continued to pinwheel before him. There was, indeed, that very afternoon. He curled his hand into a fist and pressed it hard against his chest.

"Oh, I am *terribly* sorry," he had said and had been on the point of leaving when her laughter stopped him.

"It's no skin off my elbow," she had replied, "if it's none off yours, so stay if you want." And so he had stayed, Rufus beside him.

Covered with no more than a fringed white cloth that fell prettily from her bare shoulders, she had been sitting there among bands of sunlight not far from the rough beginnings of her likeness which was fashioned in clay around a large

wire frame and stood, with arms outstretched, in crade and faceless emulation of her slim nudity. "What's your problem?" she had asked, and he was surprised, looking back upon it, how soon they had found themselves explaining it to her. Because the room was, after all, Mrs. Dunn's secret and she was certain that they knew nothing of it, and because the children in turn had as their secret that indeed they did, the two boys had constantly feared being discovered by her there and had not stayed very long; yet it had, as it happened, been long enough. They had revealed their problem to her.

Harry rolled over to the other side of the bed and pulled the pillow partially over his ears as he reviewed the scene once more. She had agreed to help them; sitting in the sun, and smiling, she had herself suggested it, with the clay arms of her image reaching out as if to embrace him. "So, but first tell me what it's all about," had been her only stipulation, and hence, with little help from Rufus, who had from the outset been strangely silent, he had told her of their scheme. It had been necessary, of course, to elaborate somewhat on the people involved, but she had, mercifully, no more required an explanation of their motive than she offered one of her own for joining them. On the next day, Harry had said, they were going to play a trick, and she had laughed at the very word, becoming more serious only when she learned that it was to be a trick concerning, among others, her employer. But, in the end, this proved more of an inducement than otherwise, and she listened with sympathy as Harry had proceeded. Mr. Cowley, whom she had briefly met and remembered, had had a vision and on the next day was to have

another; they, the children, were not to be allowed to attend, he had gone on with derision, and so, in defiance, they were going to enact one of their own; they would hide at the very spot where their elders were to assemble, and present their vision there. Mr. Cowley had had a vision, she asked, but what, exactly, was that? He had looked a sensible enough type to her, she insisted, although that was, to be sure, more than she was willing to say for his bleary-eyed friend, so just what was this vision business all about anyway? This was, after all, for better or for worse, the twentieth century. It was here that, as he recollects it, Harry feared most having been clumsy and childish, for he had found himself then trying to explain to her something that he had never taken time to explain to himself.

Mr. Cowley, Cow, was a good man, he had begun, and she must not think that their trick was against him but, instead, against the others who had, without justice or feeling, decided to bar this adventure from them; he had gone out for a walk one day and had seen something that no one, not even he, seemed to know much about except that it had something to do . . . with God, Rufus had added for him. It had something to do with God, Rufus had continued, yet it was not God that he had seen. No one knew just what he had seen, although he had tried to tell them all about it on the Fourth of July when the fireworks were going off; but it was godly. Cow was a good person. A dull person, Rufus had said, but a good one. And a rather good-looking one too, Mollie had put in, not at all ugly. He was not, like so many good people, she had insisted, an ugly one. At this observation Rufus had

laughed with so much more delight than it could be well seen to have merited that he was pressed to explain himself. "Of course *he's* not ugly," he had said, "and that's the very reason why *the* Uglies come in!" It was Harry who had, by interrupting him, prevented his defining who the Uglies were. In his bed now he barely stifled a groan at the thought of how nearly he had failed. Like Rufus, he cherished not only the term but, too, the alliance against an inept and sometimes hostile world for which it stood, and yet, as he knew without being quite able to phrase it to himself, it was an alliance that grew both out of and towards loneliness, and loneliness, like any other affliction, however unblamable, was something you did not mention before the unafflicted. And consequently Rufus's remark had passed unclarified.

What, she had asked them then, if the vision that was to take place on the following day were a true one? To which Harry had replied that, so much the better, it would only enhance the success of their own. And so she had finally agreed, for reasons she never gave, to assist them in this deception of people she scarcely knew; she would appear among children in a guise which, for all her experience at being observed as other than she was, she had never assumed before.

Mollie Purdue was her name, and "Mollie Purdue" were the words that Harry whispered into the darkness as he turned over on his back and placed his hands, palms upward, across his eyes. With infinite caution he forced his way into a waking dream. Unable, herself, to sleep, she would arise and come on little bare feet flickering white through unlit corri-

dors to where he lay, and then, to her surprise, expecting her, he would just take her by the hand and gently, gently say my dearest Mollie, you are here at last, and I am here, Harry Fogg, only fourteen now, and yet a poet too, and therefore really older far than that and, more than anything, more than either east or west, in love with you, my Mollie, Mollie Purdue. Or, better perhaps, he would say nothing but simply take her hand and draw her towards the open window where they might in silence watch the setting of the moon. With tenderness he kissed the back of his own wrist and tried then to clear his mind of every thought, or to think only of something so vast and simple as to forbid all speculation, the color blue, the sea; if only she might truly come to him, or had she already truly come, and he stretched out his hand as if indeed she had, and closed his fingers softly on the dark and empty air. The room was big with summer, and, lying again on his side, he could smell the sweetness and the damp of the night, could hear his heart.

In all the house there was only one other still awake, and that was Ellie Sonntag, who lay rigid with excitement and, her glasses on a table beside her, stared nearsightedly at the ceiling she could not see.

Unlike Harry, she did not wish to sleep. On the contrary, desperately afraid that she was slow at most things, slower even than many of her juniors, she found it often necessary to use the night as her time for catching up with them, for thinking her way, at two or three in the morning, to where the others had probably been by supper the evening before. And she found this to be necessary not only because she was

slow, although this, to be sure, was reason quite painful enough, but also because, as she strongly suspected, certain matters were perpetually being kept from her, and that, of course, made her plight only the more wearisome and her need for extra time only the more profound. So she lay there now thinking, and thinking so relentlessly that it was all she could do not to rise up out of her bed and try somehow to match with her body the unceasing exertions of her mind.

What so absorbed her at the moment were her apprehensions concerning the next day, for she was entirely certain that among her friends there was some plot whose *general* nature at least, although they had told her nothing of it, she was after some hours prepared to guess: she had little doubt that somehow, by some stealthy and dishonest means and in spite of specific instructions forbidding it, they were planning to attend Mr. Cowley's vision. This in itself was intoxicatingly wicked to her, and there was in addition the almost headier realization that—disapprove of it as she did and determined as she felt that she justly and commendably was to combat it with whatever eloquence she might muster—her ultimate loyalties would prevent her ever actually betraying them, and hence she would in the end join them in their design as, her experience told her, they would eventually, if unenthusiastically, ask her to do. It was the mere thought of what would transpire once this was agreed upon that had her tense with anticipation as she considered it.

She, more than the other children, had puzzled over Cowley's announcement and had wondered at what might be expected to occur when he returned with his companions

to the site of his earlier experience; and she, revering him as a very spring of knowledge whence such as she might, at their best, claim to have scooped up no more than a few poor handfuls, was firm in her conviction that he would produce for all to see something of holy and shattering splendor. And then, whatever he produced, to think that she herself would be there to witness it was almost beyond bearing. Perhaps God Himself would appear, and perhaps, perhaps, she allowed herself to dream, He would somehow single her out from all the others and put one or two of His great fingers on her head, saying I am God, and this is Ellie Sonntag. At His touch alone, she thought, she would be cured of everything, of whatever she had that needed curing; there would be no more double convex lenses to crack and perhaps comprehension exercises would come somewhat more easily. But, more than anything, there would simply be the immense honor itself, the honor of being the only one chosen of all those who would be assembled there. How surprised they would be and how inwardly envious. She would smile calmly at them. Oh there had been dreams in which she had found herself flying slowly, as though through crystal, above a hundred amazed and admiring faces, all wearing glasses, and that had been wonderful enough . . . but this! God with His hand upon her! Her excitement reached such intensity that she was on her feet in front of the window before realizing what she had done. Somehow, she knew, she must keep moving, and so she started to do one of the body-building exercises which she and twenty other little girls, all in blue woolen bloomers,

were obliged to practise during the winter. At the same time she started to pray.

"Oh dear God," she whispered, going down into a crouching position and thrusting her arms straight out to either side, "let it come true, come true, come true." She brought her arms together, rose again to her feet, let her arms fall, and then crouched down again.

"You can do anything You want," she rose, "so please do this," she fell, "please, please," she rose. "And bless dear Mr. Cowley," she added, falling once more only, for the last time, to rise with, "Amen." She returned then, exhausted, to her bed and was soon asleep.

Indeed, by this late hour, there was no one, not even Harry, left awake, and, with the stars clouded away and the moon set, the summer night fell vastly dark and fragrant across the complicated geography of the Dunns' roof. If they dreamed, the Dunns and their guests, they did so in silence, for no dreamer's sigh disturbed the cooling air, nor was any word uttered until at last, after long and vivid preparation, the sun rose just above the level of the wood and shone flat and bright against the east wall of the house where, above a side porch, a bedroom had been added some years before. A heavy vine of ivy grew across one of its screened sides, and through this the light filtered green and soft, yet strong enough to awaken Dr. Lavender, who lay in bed there. It was he who was the first of them to speak that day, and his remark, delivered to himself as his feet first touched the carpet, was, whatever its meaning, simply, "Poor old Tom,"

whereupon he drew on a light bathrobe printed all over with young men and young ladies riding surfboards and stepped out into the empty hall.

He entered the first bathroom that he found and, after closing the door, pulled up his pajama leg and examined his knee which had been bruised by his fall the day before. He felt it gingerly, compared it with his uninjured one, and then looked vaguely through the medicine cabinet for some liniment but, finding none, closed the cabinet door and regarded himself in its mirrored surface. After glancing to the side for a moment, he looked quickly back again as though to catch himself unawares and, peering deep into his eyes, gave a brave, gay smile. Slowly then, and still watching himself, he removed his teeth and placed them on the sink before him. Just as he was about to continue with this operation, he was attracted by the song of a bird and crossed to the window to look out upon the grass, still bright with dew, and the clear sky. It was there, with the tip of his nose just touching the window-screen and his eyes misted with sleep, that he said a brief morning prayer, whispered it with some difficulty since his teeth still lay on the porcelain wash-basin. He had barely concluded when the opening of the bathroom door made him turn swiftly around.

Standing on the threshold, her black hair falling to the shoulders of her negligée, was Sara. They stood facing each other in silence for several moments before she was able, through the sunlight and her drowsiness, to make out who it was.

“Oh, Dr. Lavender!” she exclaimed. “I do beg your par-

don, but actually your bathroom is the one directly across from your room. But still, by all means use this as long as you're here, and I'll just . . . Did you sleep well?"

Although he made no reply, she was on the point of leaving without it when the violence of his gestures made her turn once more.

"What?" she asked.

With broad cutting movements of both hands, he was trying to indicate that she must leave immediately, yet at the same time, by puffing his cheeks out with breath in order to disguise the sunken betrayal of his toothlessness, he gave her the impression of commanding something far more complex which she felt she must stay to ascertain. She came a little nearer.

"Is everything all right?"

In answer, his gestures became only the more furious, his cheeks more inflated, and this, coupled with the fact that the screen had left a dark smudge on the end of his nose, suddenly struck Sara as uncontrollably amusing, and her laughter reverberated with unnatural strength from the tiled walls. It was in seeking to support herself against the sink that she discovered what lay upon it and understood at last the cause of his discomfort. Her laughter disappeared as quickly as it had come but left her uncertain, for a moment, as to what she should do next.

"Do forgive me," she said, and yet, unable at so early and vulnerable an hour to manage adequately a situation so delicate, she did not have the perception to leave immediately but remained for a moment longer to express her

sympathy and confusion with one last glance. And this, finally, was more than he could bear, for he opened his mouth and with grotesque incoherence, gumming his words, cried out that she go, go away and leave him there alone. When the door clicked shut behind her, he sat down on the edge of the tub and pressed his face into his hands. It was there that he remembered for the first time what the day was to enfold.

Mollie Purdue, awakened by the muffled echoes of this encounter between Mrs. Dunn and Dr. Lavender, remembered nothing, not even, immediately, where it was she lay, and, the upper sheet thrown back, remained for some time in bed merely feeling the little breeze that almost invariably blew up the slope from the pond below sift lightly across her body. Although the section of lawn which she could see from her window was shaded by trees and the house itself, she recognized the day as beautiful simply by the distant buzzing of a lawn-mower and the scent of damp grass being warmed by the sun; a fold of the white shawl, which still lay across the chair where she had let it fall the night before, billowed languidly from time to time, and through a break in the trees she could see a fragment of blue sky. A mosquito hummed in drunken parabolas above her head and, pulling the sheet once more about her, she reached for a bottle of citronella that had been provided for her on the bedside table and rubbed a little on her arms and neck. The smell was pungent and profoundly a part of summer and of all summers past. She closed her eyes and tried, without success, to sleep again.

It was summer, and she, she gradually remembered, was awakening in a house of the rich and richly idle for whom

July was much that it had never been for her. Yet what it was for them she knew, had come knowing as a traveler comes to a strange land with a smattering at least of the language, and she begrudged them no detail of it any more than a traveler begrudges foreigners ways that are simply foreign. In white linen or flannel they played tennis on courts of their own, she knew for she had seen them flickering all silvery across the screens of moving pictures, and although they played long and hard, they were likely not to perspire and appeared always truly eager to give to their opponents points more justly their own. And when they had finished, there would be something cool served to them beneath great trees, or perhaps they would go swimming either in a pool several shades bluer than the ocean or in the ocean itself, spending most of their time not in the water but lying on their backs in the hot sun. This Mollie had done often herself and understood well how they could lie, for beauty's sake, an hour there despite the sunlight's blinding them, red and warm, through eyelids closed against it, despite the tedium of having nothing to do but feel the sucking heat and think, think. Or, towards the cooling end of an afternoon, there might be croquet, the placid tock-tocking of wooden balls, white shoes bright against the softness of dark lawns, cocktails out in the evening itself. A merry chase, she thought, a merry, merry chase, and yet, for the Dunns, there was something that marred the merriness, something which she could not name yet recognized when it appeared at different times, in different places: Sam Dunn smiled too much, who knew why; there had been, when she arrived, an old man

named Lavender silently eating in such a way that had she been the dessert he slowly spooned, she would have screamed, she thought; and there was the whole business of this ghost or spirit or whatever, but no one laughed or talked of it, and only the children, a boy named Harry, seemed to see it as a joke, yet not entirely. She could not have said in just what way these things spoiled what she felt such summers should properly be, and indeed she spent very little time wondering about it, yet it was clear to her that out of all that richness something had sprung that was not right. *Something* was not right.

"But so what!" she exclaimed aloud, ruffling her fingers through her blonde hair, and then got out of bed. She went over to the open window where it lay, Sara's elaborate white shawl still cool from the night air, and had just started to pick it up when, with a little cry of wonder and alarm, she let it fall again.

Out of its embroidered folds where, apparently, it had sought shelter during the night, a small bird fluttered in panic at first, darting towards the ceiling, but then down and out of the window into the day where it glided for a moment towards the dipping lawn. Mollie wrapped the shawl slowly about her and watched it wing its way upwards, watched it rise high above the tallest trees of all and disappear.

Chapter Eleven

"I THINK they're coming," said George Bundle. The bark of the stout apple branch was rough against the insides of his straddling knees, and apple leaves brushed crisply against his whitened neck and forehead as he craned forward. Mounted high in the tree which stood, itself, on top of a small hill, he had a view of the entire expanse of undulant meadow before him and could just make out a few figures emerging from the wood that blurred its distant border. He tried to count them as they advanced slowly forward, dark and indistinct against the green landscape, but they kept disappearing singly into little depressions of earth and merging on crests, and it was difficult to be accurate, no less so since Fendall had grasped the trunk in both hands and was doing his best to shake it.

"Quit it!" cried George Bundle.

"How many are there, Georgie?" asked Mollie Purdue, who sat, all in white, just below the level of the hill on the other side. There were few who could address him in such a manner without reproof, but, even though Fendall echoed the diminutive derisively, George Bundle answered her.

"Five, I think," he whispered through the sifting leaves, "or maybe six. Make Fendall get out of sight with the others." Pensively and in silence, he watched his order carried out.

The late afternoon sun that slanted into the tree fell heavy and yellow upon the sheltered side of the hill where, barefoot and dressed in sheets, the children were gathered with Mollie in their midst. They said nothing to one another but, for the most part, either toyed with the grass that grew thick with dandelions there, or stared up towards the colossal procession of cloud. Nearby a gray squirrel crouched nimbly over a windfall, so still they were.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this, Peter?" Sara had asked shortly after lunch that day. "Because there's still time to change your mind, you know." She had been sitting in the living-room wearing heavily horn-rimmed glasses and with her pen poised over the letter she had been writing.

"I'm sure, Sara," he had replied, smiling at the gravity of her expression. "But will you be ready? The letter . . ."

"Oh this," she had said and, crumpling the paper up into a ball, had tossed it towards the waste-paper basket. "We're all of us ready, all right, even though nobody wants to look as if he was. Sam's pretending to be reading in the library, and Lundrigan's out in the garden now, having come under the pretext of saying that Julie wouldn't be here. He could have phoned, you know, but he came all the way over himself just to make his little announcement in person. Oh,

we're all ready," she laughed ironically. "It's just that nobody wants to look as though he's the one person who's remembered what everybody else is pretending to have politely forgotten. That's why I was writing this—not even a letter really, just a scribble. Look," she had continued, "what I mean is that no one's going to force you to see this thing through if you don't want to."

"But if I do want to, then you'll all come?" he had said, still standing in the doorway. "The children started off towards the McMoons' half an hour ago."

"Yes, yes, we'll come, Peter. We're only human, 'to coin a phrase,' as Sam would say. Don't think we'd miss this for anything. But I'll never see why you want us."

"Why I want you?" He had come over and leaned on her desk. "Because I've got to start somewhere, so why not with the people I know best, with you?"

"But we're not the right kind, Peter. Can't you see that if it's some sort of conversion you're trying to make, we're just about the unlikeliest candidates of all because, like noble savages, there are none of us who think we *need* to be converted. I admit this about myself along with the rest of them. We're happy enough as it is. Happy," she had said, "if that's the word I have to use. We *get along* is what I mean, and that's all we ask. Julie's the only one you might have worked it on, and you know why she's not coming? Because she doesn't want to see with her own two eyes whether you're right or wrong about there being a . . . Because she'd rather not know. That's what she said. So there'll be only the three of us, plus poor Dr. Lavender, and you can imagine

what that will be. Why, if the Lord Himself appears, Sam will be terribly, terribly polite because he *is*, you know, he always is, but that will be all. And as for Dick, I once heard him say that no mature person would ever have let himself be crucified without putting up one hell of a fight. Excuse me, Peter, but I'm just repeating what he said, though maybe I shouldn't."

"He was right," Cowley answered, "and this is the fight. You're all of you in it, Sara."

"We are? Why God help us then," she had said. "God help us. I only hope you know what you're doing."

"I used to hope that too," he had replied, "but I don't any more. I don't think it makes any difference whether I know or not. But thanks anyway for a kind thought."

"Oh, Peter, Peter," she had sighed.

It was Ellie Sonntag who sighed now, sitting on the hill with her companions. Closing her eyes, she tightened her fingers about her bare feet and sighed in overwhelming anticipation of feeling the great hand placed upon her hooded head and the great voice ennobling her above all other creatures with: I am God, and this is . . . This is, I am, Ellie Sonntag, she thought, her eyes still closed, and wondered if the others were all watching her as she sat there now, if they recognized that it was a holy expression she wore, if they guessed perhaps in what way she was soon to be exaltingly set apart from everyone else, set apart, she thought, like a piece of cheese or layer cake beneath a glass bell, safe from all but seen by all, and seeing too. At the same time, how-

ever, the approaching figures, although still some distance away, had come close enough for George Bundle to recognize them, and, climbing down the tree, he made his discovery public.

"Cow," he said, "and Mr. and Mrs. Dunn and Mr. Lundrigan and Cow's friend."

Hearing him make this announcement, Ellie realized that all their eyes were not, as she had hoped they were, fixed principally on her, and, finding it unnecessary under these circumstances to maintain her attitude of reverence and meditation any longer, she opened her eyes.

"Oh, oh, oh," said Harry Fogg in tones of hushed apprehension, and he was echoed audibly by Rufus Este, silently by the others. They all lay on their stomachs now, flat against the slope that shielded them from sight, except for George Bundle, who crouched behind the apple tree and kept watch. Timmy McMoon held his sister's hand not so much to reassure her as to reassure himself that she would be, treated with such solicitude, less likely to bring disgrace upon them both by any outbreak of girlish fear, a disgrace greater even than the one he risked by being seen to hold her hand for whatever his reason. As it happened, she was altogether unperturbed, and this resulted largely from her sense of the comforting impunity which the presence alone of Mollie Purdue, a grownup, positively insured them. Indeed, this was their general feeling about the young woman they scarcely knew, and even the most diffident spirits among them had accepted her unreservedly on that basis. As trustful always of beauty as they were ever suspicious of ugliness, and

acknowledging too what seemed to them her extravagant gift of protection, the children admitted her, despite every convention, as one of themselves and hesitated only when it was noticed that Harry Fogg, alone among them, seemed to be of a different mind. Even Fendall had recognized his unusual silence in her presence, his reluctance to meet either her eye or the occasional necessity of addressing her directly, and he had, Fendall, reported this privately to Timfy Mc Moon with implications as sinister as he could manage with what equipment he had. But in the end they had simply accepted Harry's apparent dislike as unfortunate, inexplicable but, above all, immaterial, and had received her as one of the initiate in spite of it.

"Now look, kiddos," she said, "are you sure I've got it all straight what we're supposed to do?" Once again, in whispers, Rufus explained their scheme to her. Then, as before, they were still.

There was little conversation between Cowley and his companions as they trudged across the uneven ground. Lundrigan, walking somewhat apart with Sam, had, when first they started, made several attempts at it, but with hardly more for a motive than an unwillingness to appear constrained to silence by a situation of other than his own making, he had met with little success. Silence was one of the rare contexts in which he never felt entirely at ease, and hence he was more than ordinarily conscious of whatever might be the states of mind of those whom he accompanied. Could it be, he wondered, that he was the only one of them who took this in-

congruous embassy as something less than the serious matter which they, by their taciturnity, evidently felt it to be? He looked about him to be sure. Two faces were barred to him.

Sam was not smiling, yet this, Lundrigan knew, needed be indicative of nothing more than the meticulousness with which he tried always to assume the trappings at least of whatey ^{if} reaction civility should happen to demand as most decorous under the circumstances; and he might still, where none could see, be rocking with sardonic mirth. But, watching him walk along in his suit of unpressed white linen and dark blue sweater, his expression pensively, blandly, impenetrable, Lundrigan could in no way be certain of this. Nor could he, as he looked further, be any more certain of Dr. Lavender. Following a little behind Cowley, who led the group, the elderly gentleman stared so fixedly and unseeingly into the clear air that Lundrigan found it difficult to understand why he had not already stumbled over some irregularity of the terrain of which he seemed oblivious and fallen down upon it. For him Lundrigan could guess that the occasion was a grave one, but, as with Sam, his expression betrayed nothing, nothing but, in his case, intense preoccupation with some idea of his own or, as Lundrigan had more than once suspected, with no idea at all. When Sara had been speculating at an earlier point as to what the old man must be thinking about when, as so often, he stopped short in the middle of a sentence and remained for some time silent, Lundrigan had assured her that he felt certain that he was thinking of, to put it briefly, nothing; and so he struck him now. The gravity of his mien, his mouth drawn tight and his

head thrust slightly forward, could easily illustrate simply the exertion with which he was trying to think at all let alone of something as specific and arduous as the mission on which they were presently engaged. If someone were to jostle him off the course he was now pursuing, Lundrigan thought, he would proceed just as intently in another direction.

And so there was only Sara left, and Peter, in terms of whom he might test the currency of his own feelings. Of all of them, Sara was the only one who seemed in any sense to have dressed for the occasion, and he had met with a curiously quick retort upon speaking of it earlier. Whereas the four men were attired much as for any other summer afternoon, she had appeared in a rather severe, dark dress and, instead of the sandals she would ordinarily have worn, shoes with heels just high enough to make walking across open country more difficult than it need otherwise have been. It was not that Lundrigan had ever actually chanced to see her going to church, yet he entertained himself with the conjecture that if she were to go, this was the very kind of clothes she would be likely to wear—respectful, modest but, because it was irrevocably Sara who wore them, somehow anomalous too. And her entire bearing as she walked along beside Cowley only confirmed for him the accuracy of his image. It was serious, and she had so far avoided exchanging glances with any of them as if for fear that it might become less so, but it was also self-conscious and therefore, to Lundrigan at least, not wholly convincing. He was pleased to think that she too was to some degree on her guard against being quite taken in, as he silently put it, by Peter. And that left only

Peter himself. Lundrigan lengthened his stride to come abreast of him, and, even as he did so, Peter came to a halt. No longer very far ahead of them now lay the small hill they both recognized and, already starting to sink towards it, the enormous sun.

"Right over there," Cowley said, pointing towards it. "That's where it was. I," he stopped for a moment, still half turned from them, his arm still extended, "I'm going to go a little ahead, and then if you'll all come . . . in a few minutes. Tom, will you bring them?" He appeared not to notice the uncertain smile with which Dr. Lavender nodded recognition of this, for he continued without acknowledging it, very quietly and earnestly, explaining. "Down there, just where it starts being a hill and there's some forsythia; where the grass looks thicker; you see. Go there, and then if you'll . . . Then just do whatever seems best to each one of you to do, and that will be right. I don't need to tell you that. I know, but I had to say something. I had to tell you at least that I wanted you, that I'm terribly glad you're here. There's just one favor I want to ask."

Again he paused, and they waited before him in what Lundrigan felt to be an immensely awkward silence for all of them except Dr. Lavender, who stood gazing hard at his friend where the others avoided meeting any eye at all. Sam cleared his throat as if he were about to say something, to say anything to bring to an end the nearly unbearable delicacy of the moment, but Peter continued speaking before he had the opportunity.

"Beginning right now," he said, "I'll ask you please, please

not to forget anything. Remember it all, and . . ." he had started to turn away when he looked back at them once more to add, "and God bless you." He began walking then towards the hill.

With the faintest touch of his elbow, Lundrigan nudged Sam and winked, hoping, hoping more desperately than was his custom, for some definite sign that there was at least one other who remained, with him, outside the situation; but Sam, whatever his feelings, gave no response at all and only continued, like the others, to look out before him.

Cowley advanced slowly, stumbling at one point over a little mound of earth and nearly falling, but he righted himself quickly and continued on his way as though unaware of the intensity with which he was being observed. So wide and empty was the expanse of field and so high the clouds gathering in the east that his figure seemed very small and overwhelmingly alone as he wandered through their midst. If, as he had said, they were to forget nothing, their task was no easy one, for they would be obliged then to remember, among so much besides, that it was Sara who had whispered good-bye as he departed, Lundrigan who had given a sharp and audible intake of breath when he tripped, and Sam who, rocking back and forth on his heels, his hands clasped behind him, had seemed more interested in watching the absolute immobility of Dr. Lavender than in watching Cowley himself. And there was the landscape too into which, by walking forward, Cowley had drawn their gaze. They could have done no more than barely begin to master such of its general traits as the great height of sky, the sunlight dense upon the varied

shapes and shades of green, when Cowley, by his sudden action, forced them to turn to it in more detail. Reaching the hill, he walked halfway up its slope and then, after standing motionless for a moment, knelt down in the soft grass.

"Oh Lord who has made this hill a little higher than the mountains, this crookedy tree a rood in remembrance of Christ, and this, your servant Peter Cowley, a man marked out forever among other men, help me this day, having helped me already so far, to be certain where I am still puzzled; give me your hand again because it is your hand you have taught me to reach out for in my need, and to hold, if only for a moment, with my hand."

Before him, and higher still than he, rose the apple tree with its wide and twisted spreading out of branch, its sheen of restive leaf; and all about him, scattered in the grass, dandelions grew and little clumps of weed. There was more of a breeze to tremble the growing things on that slight eminence than on the lower ground where the others stood, but Cowley, still kneeling, had shut his eyes and bowed his head against it. After a short time, Dr. Lavender had beckoned his three companions forward.

"You gave me eyes to see, and I have seen a world of men who say nothing so often as that they are a Christian world; you gave me a heart to hurt, and it has hurt never so much as with knowing that they lie and, what is worse, lie often without knowing they do. I have seen a world in which hardly a man for nearly two thousand years has been willing to live out his life as Christ would have had him live it; a world in which Christ is as honored with words and little

heeded as any foolish, kind old man. If I think of this too long, the tears come.

“So how was I to act, knowing what I knew, and knowing that without action I could not endure? Out of your mercy, you gave me a sign, and in the holiness and glory of that moment I saw what I thought was my answer: by miracle alone the world could be saved, and I, for reasons I no longer ask to know, was one of those through whom your will was to be miraculously done. Miracle was more than I would have dared to pray for, but no more than my heart knew the world to need. In your grace alone, in visions of your truth and nowhere else, I saw our hope. Without your direct aid, there could be only despair.

“Since then I have doubted my understanding, and I have been made by others to doubt it in ways I could never by myself have invented, but you were pleased to let me continue, despite all this, in the conviction that I was right in what I felt my vision meant, and, believing that still, I have returned today. Let me be certain that I am not wrong.

“Grant to these four I have brought with me the vision I pray be granted at last to all of a sinning world. Forgive them, strengthen them, enlighten them . . . oh blessed and wise . . .”

Something, they saw, was happening, and Cowley alone seemed unaware of it, kneeling there a little above them with his head still bowed and his eyes closed.

“. . . trusting rather in your mercy than your justice . . .”

Upon first arriving they had simply stood uncertainly at the bottom of the hill, but after a time Dr. Lavender had knelt down upon the grass and was joined in a few minutes by Sara and then, although with a perceptible grimace, by Lundrigan. Sam alone had remained standing, but, yawning tears into his eyes and down his cheeks, he too had finally lowered himself to the ground where, however, instead of kneeling, he had sat cross-legged with his forehead resting in his hands. It was from these positions that they looked up now, beyond Cowley and towards the apple tree. Perhaps it was only the descending sun, for brilliant pennants of light streaked through the contorted branches and blinded them to all but a shattered view of what was transpiring before them, but still they were able to see clearly enough to be aware of some movement beyond that of the vibrant foliage. Had Lundrigan found it possible, as by this time he no longer did, to persist in what he considered the maturity of his attempt at remaining uninvolved emotionally with the situation, he would have quickly recognized a remarkable change to have taken place in the appearance at least of those around him there; for whatever particular trick of consciousness it was that gave always to each face its characteristic individuality was a trick from which they had each been suddenly distracted by the disarming uniqueness of the occasion, and the result was that they had helplessly assumed a curious sameness of expression. No longer would it have been possible, looking at them however searchingly from without, to have distinguished between their separate atti-

tudes of hope, alarm, or disbelief, for these had all been erased by, and generalized into, one common attitude of profound wonder.

There could be no doubt but that from somewhere a figure had emerged, clad all in white, and was standing with outstretched arms amidst the wavering haze of leaves and sun that brindled the hill's crest. No sound had attended its coming, and so quietly and with such perfect immobility did it stand in the deep grass that it was difficult to believe that it had not been always there, and could be seen now, as it had not been earlier, only because they had looked longer and grown more accustomed to the tremendous illuminations of the disappearing afternoon. Yet even then the light and the sloping distance prevented an altogether clear view, and it was perhaps because of this, and because Peter remained kneeling as a kind of defense before them, that the spectacle was striking not as something frightening or incredible but as a moment of rare and nearly absolute serenity. It was as if whatever had mattered before would, for as long as the moment lasted, matter no more.

And it lasted, if perilously, like the precarious, transient thing that it was, a little longer still; for after a time, and as unobtrusively as before, another taller figure, also robed in white, appeared and by raising its hands and letting just the tips of the fingers meet, made a rough arch above the cloaked head of that first still shape. Then six others arose from behind the hill and, holding hands, formed two protecting arcs on either side of the original pair. The central figure, rising

a little on its bare toes, started to turn slowly around and around.

George Bundle had seen ghosts before. Once in particular, awakening a little before dawn to find his room transformed with the dense white light that often just precedes the sun on a summer morning, he had rolled over in his bed to behold, overflowing an armchair that faced where he lay, a figure with a flat, featureless face and an enormous bulk, twice as big as any man that ever was and shrouded in white, that gave every sign of having sat there observing his sleep since the very first moment he had unwittingly closed his eyes many hours of darkness earlier. And once he had had a nurse who turned out to be a ghost. Two or three of them had been playing hide-and-seek with her one day, and when it came her turn to hide, she had disappeared and not been found until the afternoon was almost gone and they had discovered her crouching with a queer smile in a closet they had already searched many times before, looking for all the world, with her special day-out eyebrows drawn on with a black pencil and the pink circles on her cheeks cool to their touch, as though she had been out in the chilly air, but able to give a long account of how they had been looking for her, specific places they had searched, and even some of what they had said. And in her suitcase she had had a knife that had once killed a Mexican, and a pair of scissors in the shape of a bird with a long, pointed beak that opened and closed when the scissors did. So it was not as though he had had no experience with such matters, but this was something else

again. Never had he felt before that possibly he was a ghost himself. The longer he kept turning around, the stronger this suspicion grew, and he turned many more times than the three that had been planned.

Down at the bottom of the hill were people he knew, and halfway up the hill was Cow, whom he knew even better, but none of them had the look of knowing either him or any of his friends who were standing by him with their own sheets that covered all of their bodies and most of their faces too. Perhaps they were all ghosts, and Mollie Purdue with them whose sheet his fingers brushed as he revolved, and they were just now discovering the truth about themselves as it shone out from the blurred faces of those below who were watching but not recognizing the eight of them. You heard, George Bundle thought, of people who went around for years disguised as something they were not, murderers disguised as old ladies, witches disguised as nurses or colored cooks, even rats disguised as people as the Uglies had once told him, so why not dead people, ghosts, disguised as living people; but could he, he wondered, believe this about all of them there, about Daisy and Ellie, Timmy and Fendall, Harry and Rufus, whom he had known all summer without ever once having the thought cross his mind? How, for instance, could he believe it about Fendall and the McMoons, whose parents he knew, and who would, as parents, know the truth about their own children and not be very likely to keep them around the house if they knew *that*, unless of course the parents themselves were ghosts? And if that was so, why then

they were all ghosts together, ghosts being watched by ghosts, all of them knowing. But that was too terrible, or too wonderful, and he put it out of his mind altogether as he felt Mollie prod him in the back to remind him of what he was supposed to do. He had already stopped his twirling but had not yet said what he was supposed to say, so he whispered it now, the name and titles of Christ, losing them somewhere in the breeze and then letting his head drop to his chest with his arms stretched out to either side and the sun warm and green upon him through the apple branch. George Bundle the ghost, he thought, G.B., gee bee, geebee, geebee the gee, and then, to his own surprise, he forgot his name, forgot the names of his friends and of the people down the hill, forgot both the why and the where of them all, and knew only that his head hung heavy from the stalk of his neck, his arms ached, and out of the corner of his eye he could see Ellie Sonntag's fists clenched at her sides. They stood there in ambiguous charade, motionless except for the billowing of white robes. Then, as quietly as they had come, they disappeared from sight.

No one of those who remained made a move either to rise or to speak. Sam, still sitting with his head in his hands, had fallen asleep, and the others stayed on their knees. High above the apple tree, the lower edges of the clouds began to fall away into wisps of red, for, lower now than the level of the hill, the sun was sinking towards the horizon itself, and the blue sky paling as the light spread and thickened across it. The breeze abated, and there began to be sound again as,

somewhere, a bird sang, and once more the crickets rasped. But those who were silent seemed only the more profoundly so.

How long they continued there, unmoving, none of them could have said, but at last Sara arose and ran up the slope, past Cowley, to the top of the hill. Holding on to the tree, she gazed down upon the meadow on the other side. Too far away to call to, the little band was running, their white sheets floating out behind them, towards the wood, and with her hand to her eyes she watched until the last of them had disappeared into the trees.

After all then, she thought, it had been only the children; whatever it had seemed at first to be, there had been nothing more, she was forced to recognize, than the children playing their trick towards the end of a summer afternoon before an audience too variously moved to rise up and shout as, had they been close enough to hear, she would have shouted now, oh clever, frightening children, are you so little human then, not to know what it is you have done! Go away, away, away and let us be. . . . And yet, she thought, leaning against the trunk and still looking, although unseeingly, towards the wood and the sky that flamed up behind it, no matter how apparent the truth now was, it was impossible to see it as having been all deception. Surely, when the first figure in white had appeared, glittering with sun and all the green and placid beauty of sun through leaves and on grass, the very air soft as a mist with the wonder of it, there had been a moment beyond a child's contriving. Whoever the child and

whatever his motive, there had been, for the miracle of that instant, more by far than simply a child before them. The heart, she felt, could not be, no, never, so deceived; but then, allowing her memory to stray where she knew that she could count on its being always sweetly wounded, she permitted herself the pleasure of a tear, and in her mind repeated that indeed it could, the hoping heart, be deceived again and again. As a woman and, she breathed deep, as an artist, it must be ever so; yet she thrilled to her conviction that it was her glory too. Through the somber and melancholy velvet with which she was moved occasionally to drape her life and, more especially, her career as a sculptress, hopped and fluttered always these irrepressible and nearly unmentionable lice of her enjoyment.

So carried away was she by these reflections upon the proud, sad depths of her own capacity that she quite forgot the situation that had originally occasioned them, and oh la la, she thought, I am happy, but was entirely unaware that this happiness stemmed, as she would never have admitted it, from her relief at knowing that it was, incontestably and whatever her casuistry, the children and no more than the children who had appeared on top of the hill where now she stood. Only her concern for Cowley drew her back to the recognition of responsibilities that she felt were hers of somehow setting matters straight again or, if nothing else, of at least getting them all back home.

In her absence, Sam, Lundrigan and Dr. Lavender had arisen and, unwilling to disturb Cowley, who remained kneeling on the hillside, by either calling out to her or going to

get her, simply awaited her together in silence. As soon as she had turned around, Sam beckoned her to come, but, although her impulse was also to avoid at any cost an encounter now with Peter, she forced herself to stop by him on her way down to join the others. The vividness of the sunset, which had by now enflamed all of the sky before him, reflected as ruddy a cast upon his face and forehead as though he had been fiercely struck. Although she stood directly beside him, he gave no sign of having noticed her approach; and so, timorously and with an uneasy smile, she laid her hand upon his shoulder and softly called his name. As a child she had once followed out of a crowded room a man whom she thought, from the familiar coat he wore, to be her father, only to discover when she had, after walking some little distance with him, pulled at the familiar sleeve to attract his attention, that it was, instead, a stranger she accosted. All the shock of that discovery returned to her now as Peter glanced up towards her, and she withdrew her hand from his shoulder. Would they, he asked her in tones that acknowledged no background of sympathy between the two of them, return home without him. He would come later. And that was all. She was unable to muster enough presence even to answer him and continued down the hill without once looking back. They left him behind as he had asked and started, the four of them, to walk back the way they had come.

“Oh Cowley,” Lundrigan said, the grass going flick, flick against his faintly pointed shoes, “Cowley the love-lost and Christ-bescrewed,” and he glanced around him, smiling with only half of his dry mouth and hoping to have sprung the

anger of at least one of his listeners, it did not matter which one, because anger was something he could deal with; but he saw that he had sprung nothing and so repeated what he had said, scuffing an emphasis out of the ground he walked. "Cowley the Christ-bescrewed, the love-lost." And damnation, he thought, upon whoever remained unmoved by epithets prepared, as prophecies, in advance.

"He'll only turn the other cheek you know, Richard," Sam said with maddening mildness, "because that's what the book says, the book he takes along to eat when he comes out here reading his apple."

"What can you know when you slept through the whole thing!" He had spoken sharply and continued quickly upon it, correcting his tone lest the sharpness be taken for a defense of Cowley, a protest against sleeping through what Cowley had bid them never forget. "Of course he'll turn the other cheek, book or no book, because it's one devil of a lot pleasanter than having the same one slapped twice." That was good, and he let a little silence frame it. "Sleepy Sam," he said with what would pass for a laugh.

"You didn't, Sam!" Sara was halted by her indignation but, since no one halted with her, had to hasten, with heels too high, to rejoin them. "How *could* you sleep?"

"It was very warm," Sam said.

"And why shouldn't he? Look at Julie." Lundrigan thought that with Sara he need only open the trap that had already been unlatched.

"What?" she exclaimed.

"Julie."

"But she wasn't even there."

"And why?"

"Why, because—and I told Peter himself this—she said she didn't want to see for herself whether he was right or wrong."

"Well, Sam?" Lundrigan asked.

"No," he replied. "That wasn't my reason, because I didn't have any. I was just sleepy. That's all."

"Oh really, Sam!" Sara said.

Not knowing of the persisting sense of felicity and relief that she had felt first on the hill, Lundrigan watched, with as much puzzlement as disappointment, as her annoyance retreated.

For that matter there was not a great deal, he realized, that had come about quite as he had expected. To be sure, the accuracy of his prediction that there was to be no vision could scarcely now be denied, but he might expect little credit for having foreseen anything beyond that, not even his own subsequent state of mind, and this it was that disturbed him most. Incredulous as he had from the beginning been, he had nonetheless knelt down with the others, because, having consented to come at all, he had felt it only reasonable to conform in that minor and insignificant particular; but then he had, as he would never have believed, been for a moment or two as moved as any of them, and that, it seemed to him, he might have easily foretold since there were, after all, such altogether valid explanations as simply the very unusualness of the occasion, the initially successful ruse of the children, and, of course, the exceptional beauty of the late afternoon

itself. But he had been deceived by these circumstances for a shorter time, he imagined, than anyone else, and it was consequently not this that most dismayed him. Instead he could not, to his considerably greater pain, avoid recalling the conversation he had had with Cowley several days earlier at the beach. They would see nothing, he remembered having told him, except a lonely man on a little hill, and this, as it turned out, had not been true. Certainly they had seen nothing, or nothing, at least, in terms of what Cowley had promised them, and to that extent he had been undeniably correct. But he had spoken also of loneliness.

There Cowley had knelt with, as much as any tree or sunlit slope of green, his hope about him. Whatever else he did not have—and in this connection Lundrigan named to himself what he considered to be the virtues of, among others, emotional stability, maturity of direction and the like—he had at least his fanatic hope which, if inferior in every other human situation to the qualities Lundrigan felt him to lack, equaled, perhaps even surpassed, them as a defense against solitude. Whereas, Lundrigan admitted, such rational habits of mind as he himself most admired encouraged you to remain prudently within yourself where you tended always to be most alone, a hope like Cowley's, however unreasoning, drew you forward into ardent communion with whatever it was towards which you ardently hoped. Deceived Cowley might be, but lonely he was not. The very presence there of the Duncs, Lavender and, for that matter, the children too, appeared to Lundrigan in a way to confirm this; for to what degree, if any, they were with him in spirit seemed to him a

trifling consideration in view of the fact that they were with him at all. It was not without reluctance that Lundrigan had come at last, while kneeling there in the soft grass, to the realization that if, as he had said, there was indeed a lonely man on that little hill, it was not only not Cowley, but neither Dr. Lavender nor Sara nor even Sam, who all, in one way or another, probably hoped at least a little with their friend; it was, on the other hand, no other but himself. He alone, except for an instant, had managed to remain outside of the situation. The loneliness was his own, a game in which, to his humiliation and dismay, he found himself suddenly It, and rather than question his own skill in playing, he chose, in nearly petulant silence, to doubt the fairness of the others. It was not for him to be the last to come in, the slowest and grubbiest of them all. The very fact that he was obliged now, there being no alternative, to accompany them back across the meadow as the sun set seemed to him to be only mawkishly conforming once more to rules he both mistrusted and despised.

"Look," said Dr. Lavender, who had, until now, been silent, "the world is on fire." He had stopped and turned to gaze back towards the scarlet and shattered west.

"Oh I do hope," said Sara, "that Peter's all right."

"Peter's all right," said Sam.

"You bet he is," said Lundrigan. "Peter's just fine." He turned to continue on his way, but no one followed him so he remained.

"Yes," said Dr. Lavender. "The children . . ."

No one had yet mentioned them, and, during his pause, Sara, in her mind, saw them again as they had gone running towards the wood with their sheets billowing out behind them, white against the dark grass and tiny beneath the immense conflagration of sky. Deceivers of the heart, she remembered, the hoping heart, as on fire as the world was on fire, and she loved the tear she felt wet on her lashes.

"He is all right," Dr. Lavender continued, "because they have saved him forever. They have saved us all."

"It was just the children?" asked Sam after a little silence, adding then gently, with mock trepidation, "I hadn't wanted to ask . . ."

"Sam, how could you sleep!" Sara exclaimed. "Yes," she spoke quietly again, trying to match the vast silence of the hour, "it was just the children, oh and Mollie Purdue, I think."

"Yes," said Lundrigan. "Mollie Purdue was there too. Everybody except—"

"Just the children!" With more incredulous violence than they had ever before heard in his voice, Dr. Lavender faced them.

"Except God," concluded Lundrigan.

"Don't you see, don't you see!" cried Dr. Lavender. With the queer light upon it, his wisp of topknot seemed more pink than white. "A child is a miracle," he said, "and Peter's miracle was a child. You saw him standing there like the Lord Jesus with his hands out and a message. Innocence, innocence, innocence is what he was sent to say, sent mind

you, and see! the sky is burning still with the truth of it. The sky is . . ." His voice dropped from almost a shout into a silence that no one of them interrupted.

He leaned over and rubbed his knee. "Hobble home," he whispered. "If this be I as I think it be, why does my little dog bark at me?" Do you know about the old woman who had her skirts snipped short around her knees and her head shaved while she was asleep by the road? Nobody recognized her after that, not even her little dog. It's a sad rhyme. She didn't even recognize herself." He laughed a little, helplessly. "I hurt my knee.

"The world is too old and too wise," he continued. "At sixty-five it should have retired; didn't. Well, but no matter. It knows too much!" Again his voice rose. "When you know too much, you can't act any more, because everything is too complicated then. They say Rome wasn't built in a day, but I say it was. If it hadn't been built in a day, it wouldn't have been built at all, because they would have talked themselves out of it, thought themselves out of it, if they'd waited. They knew too much even then, and if they'd waited, they would have remembered all that knowing and decided to build nothing. Rome *had* to be built in a day. What was I saying?

"Underneath that crooked old tree a little child stood, and when I saw him, I knew there had been a miracle, and I knew what the miracle meant. In that vision of candor and innocence I saw that there is no longer any room for such as you and me and that it is the children who must inherit the earth that they alone are equipped to live in with the simplicity and power to act of Jesus. I am not ashamed to be crying a

little here in front of you, because for us—we are selfish clingers on to things—this is in a way a sad discovery, but it is our salvation too. By marrying child to child we perpetuate the race of children, and that race will build on earth, in a day, the city of the Lord. Out of the marriage of children the New Jersalem springs. The wedding of the child is . . . ”

But they heard no more of what he had to say, because he had started to wander away from them, and, once he reached the edge of the wood near which they were standing, his voice grew too faint to decipher although they could tell that he was still speaking. Lundrigan tapped his forehead and slowly shook his head back and forth.

“No,” Sam said. “No is the only answer we can make to him. No and no.”

“I hope Peter’s all right,” said Sara and, taking her husband’s arm, began after a few minutes to walk towards the trees that separated them still from home. Only one great arc of sun remained above the horizon, and already much of the sky was growing dark.

Chapter Twelve

THEY would kiss, and then, after a while but not very long after, they would marry. Rufus would of course be there as best man, envying him a little such beauty as was now his, but glad for him too, and everyone would watch as he slipped the golden ring over her finger, made the proper responses to the minister and, after the ceremony, smiled and spoke courteously to each of the many who came up to him, not without a certain awe, to offer their wishes for his unending fame and happiness. They would marvel, these largely anonymous spectators, at how graciously attentive he was to all such pedestrian details when, as they knew, he actually passed his life, the mysterious and shimmering life of a poet and thinker, whole altitudes above them. And then, once this was all over, they would go off, he and Mollie, and live in a lovely house as protected from the world as it was world-renowned, for he would, by then, be famous among the peoples of the earth. When she smiled, the corners of her mouth turned up, and that was not true, although it was

such posed to be, Harry knew, of most mouths. And her hair, he remembered, grew soft and full as a chrysanthemum.

The children had continued running until they were well into the woods, and only then, when they had at last stopped to catch their breath, did they discover his absence. They had called out his name several times and asked one another in whispers where he might be, but because not even Rufus had been able to tell them, and fearing still the possibility of pursuit, they had hurried on without him towards the McMoons' house where they were supposed to have spent the entire afternoon. So it was that he had been left to wander alone now among the trees, his sense of the beating of his own heart greater far than it had been during the pantomime upon the hill because this, unlike the other, he shared with no one. Leaving even Rufus out of his confidence, he had gone where none might easily find him and had gone, furthermore, for the purpose alone of thinking uninterruptedly and in solitude about Mollie Purdue. It was, he realized, the only thing that he had ever done out of his love for her and for no other reason, because if there were no Mollie, he knew, he would not be where now he was. Solely because of her he had done as he had done, had stayed behind in the empty wood, and even though she herself could not be aware of this, his own recognition of it was enough to make the moment seem to him sacredly theirs, not only his but hers as well.

Some day they would have children, and one of his fairest images was of Mollie telling them in the hushed tongue of reverence that they must play more quietly because their

father was working. "Your father, you know, is . . . a Great Man," she would whisper, and there they would stand, she and the exquisite little girl and the stalwart little boy, looking up the curved white staircase towards the stately white door behind which, in a room crowded with sunlight and destiny, he, Harry Fogg, would be seated before a page of foolscap already immortal with the beginnings of a new poem. Under the climbing stars he would lie with her slender and cool beside him. The world would be their world, her beauty would be his beauty, and the brilliance of his succeeding would be theirs.

He flung himself down upon a bed of sere pine-needles and gazed up towards the tops of the tall trees where, with his eyes, he convoyed the birds from branch to branch. Curiously and suddenly then he found it impossible to continue envisioning scenes and projecting encounters where in one way or another his love might triumph, for it was as if his very freedom to do so had at last paralyzed him, and he could only repeat her name to himself again and again with baffled ardor and see in his mind the guise in which, slim and pale in the sun, she had last stood near him. Dearly as he had looked forward to this hour of evening where there would be no longer either anyone or anything to divert him from the luxury of abandoning himself altogether to the tenderest whim of his lover's fancy, she would no longer come alive in his imagining, nor could he, even in his waking dream, address her in the language of his desire.

"Mollie Purdue," he said, "Mollie Fogg, Mollie, Mollie," and when, after a few minutes, he became aware of another

person walking near where he lay, he knew in an instant of near panic that it was she. She too then had stayed behind to wander in the wood alone, and the possible implications of that stirred him to a point where he wanted nothing so much as to be able to run away and hide, but it was clear that she had already seen him.

"Hi," she said in the thin voice of one who has been for some time silent and, folding aside a jutting plume of pine branch, stepped into his little clearing. Like him, she still carried her sheet with her and, spreading it over the ground, sat down upon it, curling her legs beneath her.

Harry had answered her greeting and, supporting himself on his elbows, allowed himself to look at her more searchingly than he would ever have dared had she also been looking at him. Instead, her eyes only followed the little stream of pine-needles which she let fall from her open hand, and so dense did her preoccupation seem that he understood with gratitude that it would not be necessary for him to be the first to try beginning a conversation. Simply her nearness to him was marvel and delight enough, and silence only enriched it. If only, he thought, they might remain there just as they were until the morning sun spread in through the trees, and then longer even than that. He lowered his glance as she turned hers toward him.

"How come you're still out here, Rufus?" she asked, her eyes conscious again, her voice clearer.

"Harry," he said. "I'm not Rufus."

"Of course," she replied. "I knew that. Sorry. I've got rocks in my head."

"People are always doing it," he apologized.

"No kidding!" she laughed. "As for me," she said, "Harry, I had to have myself a little think, so I gave the others the slip, just kept on running when they stopped, you know. I didn't know you were here too." She picked up another handful of pine-needles.

And what, he would ask her, did you want to have your little think about? She would not answer right away, but then: About you, Harry, she would whisper. He would let his hand lie palm upwards on her sheet, and she would place hers softly in it. And what were *you* thinking about? her brown eyes gentle, and her voice so low, low. About you, he would say, closing his fingers upon hers, because I love you, Mollie. I . . . With this ring I thee wed. "Hush, darlings, your father is working, and his work will be your fame, and mine." The sweet corners of her mouth. Forever and forever I love, Mollie, you.

"What were you . . ." he began, but she interrupted him.

"Back there," she said. "It was funny back there. Sort of gave me the creeps, and I've been having crazy thoughts ever since. You'd never guess how crazy; I don't suppose anybody would."

"Yes," said Harry. "I've been having them too really."

"Have you now?" she exclaimed without much interest. "It was a funny business all right, and not just what went on either but what I thought even more. What went on wasn't so bad, though I wished one of them would have got up and said something, anything to let us know they knew who we were, all of them kneeling there, especially Cawley,

Curley, whatever you call him. Praying, I think. It was bad enough but not too bad, not even when little Georgie kept spinning longer than he was supposed to until I poked him, and nobody could hear what he said, which is probably just as well because they might have gotten sore at that. And I couldn't have blamed them if they had, especially if they came out there really expecting the McCoy. Do you think they were sore, Harry?"

"No," he said. "At least I hope he wasn't." And, for himself, he hoped that his answer was appropriate, for he had scarcely heard what she was saying, knew only that he had never seen her more beautiful.

"Well, maybe they weren't sore at you kids, but they still may be at me. I'm not drawing my pension yet, but at twenty you're no kid any more either. How old are you, about sixteen?"

"Pretty close," said Harry.

"Well, that's it," she continued. "Four years difference isn't so much, but it's enough, and they know it."

"I still wouldn't worry though," said Harry.

"No, you're right, and it never gets you anywhere anyway," she answered. "But that's not what's really worrying me. In fact worry's not even the right word in a way." She laughed, and for the first time then looked at Harry as though specifically aware of who he was. She spoke always a little breathlessly, in somewhat the tones of a boy whose voice is just about to change.

"What have you been thinking about?" Harry asked her.

"That's what's so crazy," she said. "I can hardly tell my-

self. But what about you? You must have something on your mind too, staying out here all alone."

"No," he said, looking away. "Nothing really. I just felt like being alone, that's all."

She looked at him speculatively as, for a few minutes, they were silent.

"You told me you wrote poetry, didn't you?" she mused.

"A little," he said. "I like it quite a lot, and I try to write a little sometimes."

"Yes," she replied. "You told me you did."

"Yes," he said. Her pause had almost invited him to speak further on this subject when she began again.

"Well maybe you could write a poem about this," she said. "About what I've been thinking, I mean. I wonder."

"What is it?" he asked her.

Again she turned to the pine-needles, this time simply rubbing them slowly between her palms. Although little more than half an hour had passed since the vision, and the dusk was still light, Harry thought of it as having been far longer than that. Mollie, leaning on one straight arm and with her legs still curled beneath her, had thrown her head back, and he marveled at the line of her throat as it curved finely from the tip of her chin down into the open neck of her cotton dress. In a moment she sat up again and turned her face away from him. He lay on his side now watching her.

"What were you thinking about?" he repeated.

"In my business," she said, softly, and no more to him, it pained Harry to realize, than to the trees themselves, "the one thing you've got to be good at is being looked at. And I

am good at it—not at the very top yet maybe, but not too far from it either. I've got the knack somehow of looking like whoever I'm supposed to look like. I even feel like whoever I'm supposed to be feels. Like an actress, you know; I sort of live my parts. Been doing it ever since I was about your age, so of course I *ought* to be good at it. Take this job with Mrs. Dunn, for instance. There I'm supposed to be more or less the mother-nature type, the kind who has her babies off in the bushes somewhere and then goes right back to smashing up a bowl of corn or whatever it is. She calls it *Abundance*. You know. Well, and somehow I can fix it so I look just like that type, even feel like it. It's just a knack I have. Sometimes I do fashion stuff, and in a mink stole and with a pair of rhinestone buckles on my shoes you couldn't tell me from Mrs. Astor's pink horse. But I'm not blowing my own horn just to impress you. It's part of what I've been thinking. It's the beginning of it you might say."

What would Rufus say, Harry wondered. For the first time that evening he felt the need for his friend as a means of gauging what his own reaction should best be. He was not sure what Mollie was saying nor what, if anything, she expected of him. In his mind he drew back from her a step or two and beheld her with new curiosity.

"I don't know what got into me," she continued, turning back to look at him once again, "when I said I'd help you kids play your trick, but I did. And there I was on that hill wrapped in a sheet with the old man with the watery eyes kneeling down there, and everybody else kneeling too, all looking at me making an arch with my hands over the head

of that little boy. They were all *looking* at me!" Her voice nearly cracked with incredulity. "Do you see what I mean? Do I," she gave what was either a laugh or a sigh, "do *I* see what I mean? It's so crazy!"

She appeared to search Harry's face for encouragement or explanation, but he supplied neither, managing only, as he had been unable before, to look into her eyes.

"Me with my knack of looking and feeling like whoever I'm supposed to be," she continued to exclaim, "and there I was with all of them squinting at me for all they were worth through the sun. Thank God for the sun," she breathed. "And what were they looking at me *as*? Do you get it, Harry, what they were looking at me *as*? They saw me," she was almost whispering now, "as a holy saint or as an angel, and so—for a while—that's what I was."

For a time then she said nothing, gazing down at the earth with her head bowed and her hands crossed on her lap. Except for the sibilance of the wood, there was only silence.

"I've been so many things in my life," she continued in the same hushed voice, "but that was a new one. Religion's for those who think they need it, I've always said, and I've never gone overboard for it myself, but there they all were kneeling, almost like they were kneeling down to me, I thought, and praying, and so I said to myself I'll give them whatever it is they want most. I didn't know what they were praying for exactly, but I prayed that they'd get it. I took them each one in turn and prayed: God, let him have this and let her have that and let that old man there have what he wants too. Be good to them because it's me who's asking

you to. Just the way a saint does, you know, so you can see how crazy it was. But not then. And you know what? I never asked anything for me!

"So I stayed out here to think it all over, only I can't think straight about it. We were awful to do it maybe, and maybe I was the most awful of all. But it was almost *beautiful*, and I didn't even mind when Georgie messed things up by spinning too long and nobody could hear him. So could it be awful and beautiful both? Anyway it wasn't what Colley came to see. A vision, didn't you say, and that he really believed in it? And it was only us. Maybe if we hadn't've been there, he'd've gotten what he wanted. And maybe . . . But this is so queer I can hardly say it. I told you I prayed that he'd get whatever he wanted, and maybe he did. Maybe we were it!"

"You mean *we* were the vision?" Harry asked her.

"Maybe," she said. "So is that a poem for you, or could it be," she laughed, "that you don't write poems about dim wits?"

"No," he said. "It isn't that. I think that what you said is the strangest, most wonderful thing I've ever heard." His voice was vibrant with feeling, but still she peered through the thickening dusk to be sure of his sincerity.

"You're kidding," she said.

"No, really!" he persisted. "I mean it. It would be a marvelous poem."

"But do you think I could be right? Were we more than just ourselves?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Neither do I."

Harry had moved so that he lay now with his head resting on the crook of his arm near Mollie's knee, and they remained there for some time without speaking. Then, sighing that perhaps they should begin to wander back and face whatever was going to have to be faced, she said that she was glad, as she thought of it, that she had found him there, glad that there had been *somebody* to talk to, and absent-mindedly she smoothed the back of his neck with her cool hand while Harry Fogg prayed that lightning might come and, by striking them both dead there in the darkening wood, somehow perpetuate what he knew to be the happiest moment he had ever known or would ever know as long as life should last.

It was on their way back across the field that they met Cowley. There was no escaping him, for, once he had seen them, he waved his hand in their direction, and they had no choice but to join him where he awaited them at a little distance from the hill by which Sara had left him earlier. He stood there with his trousers stained from kneeling and his hands in his pockets, watching their approach, and if his face was still as changed as Sara had thought it, it was a change that would go unnoticed now in the heaviness of the dusk.

They had been coming slowly towards him when suddenly Mollie started to run. Leaving Harry behind, she sped across the dark grass towards the motionless figure of Cowley and,

when she reached him, grasped him by the shoulders and spoke in a voice of breathless anxiety.

"Oh I'm sorry," she cried. "Forgive us if we hurt you, because we really didn't think what we were doing!" and then, in her excitement, since he did not immediately answer but stood there with a helpless expression of baffled surprise, she made another less coherent apology and, clutching him still more firmly, buried her face against the rough lapels of his jacket.

"There, there," he said at last, patting her hair like a child's, "that's all right, and don't worry." His voice was gentle and consolatory, but there was also a trace of impatience in it as though her contrition moved him yet at the same time distracted him from other considerations to which he was more anxious to attend. "Maybe you didn't think what you were doing," he said, "but at least you were doing *something*. And you didn't hurt me, I promise you that."

"What?" she asked him, drawing a little back from him but still holding on to the edge of his jacket. "What did you say?"

"I said," he replied, "that you didn't—" but he was prevented from continuing by the arrival of Harry, who had run to join them, and spoke before Cowley had finished.

"Is she all right!" he cried, short of breath and with his sheet trailing over his shoulder. She had fled him, his Mollie, and he had seen her throw herself at Cowley.

"Me!" she exclaimed, turning towards him. "Of course I'm all right, right as rain. It's *him*!"

In a moment he understood and, chastened, did what he felt she had expected of him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cowley," he said quietly, "if we made you mad. It was the others we wanted to do it to, not you."

"I'm all right," Cowley repeated. "I'm all right, and I'm not mad."

"Then *what* are you?" Mollie asked, standing back from him, her voice high with wonder. "If you're not mad, what *are* you then?"

"We must get back," was all he said, and his curtness reminded them both, as they followed his suggestion and started after him towards the wood, of the intense embarrassment they had felt upon first seeing him there, an embarrassment they had each for a time forgotten in view of their separate and momentarily greater concerns, Mollie's for Cowley himself, Harry's for Mollie. Their uneasiness was heightened by what they both felt—and what Harry, knowing him better and accustomed, as Mollie was not, to his usual mildness, marveled at—to be a kind of irritability in his manner. It was not, Harry sensed, that he was irritated at them, but still, he thought, they would do well not to risk provoking him with further conversation of any kind. He tried with a glance to convey this to Mollie, but, through the air dense with evening, she noticed nothing.

"Mollie . . ." he breathed, hoping by this device to warn her, but again, hastening after their companion, she did not respond, so that there was nothing left for him but to hope that she, like him, was of herself aware of what seemed to be this tension between them, and that she would remain silent.

And so, to his relief, she did, for they completed their journey back to the Dunns without uttering a word.

The french windows of the living-room had been left wide open, and it was through these, brushing aside the curtains billowed by the wind that had sprung up with evening, that they entered the house, Cowley first, followed by Mollie and then Harry. Stretching along one entire side of the building, it was a large, low-ceilinged room, lit now by only one tall lamp near the windows where they stood, and hence not for a moment or two did they realize that it was occupied at its darker end. What first notified them of this was no voice, for some minutes passed before anyone spoke, but simply the sound of several tentative chords being struck on the piano by a heretofore motionless figure seated there. Not until the last reverberation had rumbled into silence did the figure turn about on the stool to reveal itself as Lundrigan.

"Welcome," he said, and Cowley advanced a few steps farther into the room, leaving Mollie and Harry by the lamp that illumined the curious looks of apprehension they wore. As if this word had been a signal prearranged among them, three other faces turned towards the newcomers. Sam, who had been standing with his back towards them looking out of the windows across the room from those by which they had entered, pivoted around to examine them, and Sara, seated in an armchair near the piano, looked up from the carpet and followed his glance. Lying on her back on a deep sofa, Julie McMoon raised herself on one elbow as Lundrigan, swinging back to the keyboard, started to play some quiet melody. Again and then again the curtains swelled with wind,

then flattened themselves against the window-frame before rising once more.

"We were so *worried*, Peter," said Sara, and her tone of mingled concern and reproof confirmed her sincerity. "It got to be so late, and you still hadn't come back," she went on, remaining in her chair, "and Harry and Mollie hadn't come back either so we didn't know *what* had happened."

Except for Lundrigan, who continued playing, they all looked to Cowley for an answer, but he waited several minutes before speaking. "Nothing happened," he said then, and coming as late as it did, the remark seemed to have greater and more unfortunate relevance than simply as a counter to Sara's protest. Nothing happened, he had said, and in order to avoid having to deal with his words in their larger sense, Sara broke quickly in upon them with another subject.

"Poor Julie," she continued hastily. "The children were supposed to go to her house for the afternoon as you know, and of course they didn't . . . so she came over here to find them and, when she couldn't, didn't know what to do. She had absolutely no idea where they might be, and naturally she didn't want to come out to where we all were, so she just went home and worried herself sick all alone there. They turned up eventually, thank God, and we punished them, Peter. We sent them all to bed without giving them a bite to eat. It was a very, very bad and thoughtless thing they did. We told them so."

"We really punished them, Peter," Julie said. Her tone was indecisive whereas Sara's had been positive. "I did let Daisy have a sandwich and a glass of milk because she

couldn't have known what it was all about, but that wasn't much, and Timmy didn't get anything at all."

"It was the least we could do," Sara began again. "We're ashamed for them all, Peter, and terribly, terribly sorry."

His hands clasped behind him and staring down at the floor, Cowley continued to stand near the center of the room saying nothing.

"We're terribly sorry, Peter dear, and . . ." she groped visibly for anything with which to break a silence that had become all the more deafening since Lundrigan had turned again from the piano. It was Sam who came to her assistance. He walked over to Cowley and laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"It's been a long day, cousin," he said, smiling his kindest smile, "for all of us. And now it's darkling, and there's a sweet wind blowing, so what would your pronouncement be to the idea of taking, as they say, a little something before supper?"

"Splendid ideal!" exclaimed Lundrigan, tinkling on the upper keys, and Sam had turned to get glasses when Peter interrupted them.

"You slept, Sam?" he said.

"I beg your pardon."

"This afternoon, I mean. I thought I saw that you were sleeping there."

"Why yes," Sam replied. "I regret to say that I was, but not on purpose. You can't fall asleep on purpose, Peter." Since Cowley seemed no longer interested in holding him there, Sam returned to the glasses, giving Sara a quick glance of interrogation as he did so.

"You, Julie," Cowley continued, walking over to the sofa where she lay, "would not come with me at all because . . ." and he paused then, forcing her to complete his statement.

"Because I just couldn't, Peter," she pled, attempting a thin, freckled smile, her large eyes dark with uncertainty as she tried to grasp his mood. "Somebody had to stay with the kids, and I've been awfully tired lately. Whatever was going to happen would have been too much of a strain, although I suppose I would have come if I'd thought you really wanted me."

"I did want you," Cowley said, his voice flat and tired. There was no sound in the room except for the clinking of ice as Sam placed it in the pit. Harry and Mollie had disappeared. "You came, Sara," he went on, not turning to look at her, but still standing near Julie, "and, Dick, you were there, kneeling down even, and I was surprised at that and happy. Do you remember what you saw, I wonder? I asked you not to forget any of it if you could, and I wonder if you have." He turned now and confronted them. They started to speak simultaneously, but Lundrigan deferred.

"It was so lovely really," Sara said with a rare softness, "so lovely that, to tell the truth, I could hardly punish them. Those little idiots standing there all in white with the sun shining down on them and the grass so green, I'll never forget it, Peter, whether you tell me to or not."

"And is that all you saw?" Cowley asked, but before she had a chance to reply, Lundrigan broke in.

"This is just a bit ridiculous, don't you think, my friend, this little cross-examination you're carrying on?" He had

spent the entire day unpleasantly in the background, and his words came now crisp and rapid with annoyance. "You're not our teacher, you know, and we're not your pupils, and if you'd like to know just what we did see, I for one would be happy to tell you."

"I know what you saw," Cowley interrupted, and he stammered with excitement as he spoke. "You saw nothing, and that is what you went to see!"

His words were followed by a crash that seemed all the more earsplitting for the comparative quiet that had preceded it. As he had spoken, he had raised his hand to shoulder level and, upon finishing, had brought it sharply down upon the tray that Sam, unnoticed, had been on the point of offering, and so dashed it to the floor with its entire load of glasses and pitcher. The noise was vast and sudden, and although it had been, of course, no more than an accident, its effect was otherwise, for both to his listeners and, curiously, to Cowley himself, it was as if he had done it on purpose. Even Cowley was carried away by it to the extent of actually feeling, as for more apparent reasons did the others, that he had struck the tray down as a conscious and purposeful gesture; of actually speaking, as now he did, with as much wrath as the violence of that gesture would, if purposeful, have indicated that he genuinely felt.

"You saw nothing," he repeated before their ears had stopped ringing from the clatter of breaking glass, his voice loud and unsteady, "and that is just what you went to see!"

"And you!" Lundrigan cried. "What did you see?"

"Nothing!" exclaimed Cowley, and with his hand he

gripped the back of a chair. "I too saw nothing at all."

"Very well then," Lundrigan said, rising to face him. "So what's the good word now?"

Cowley turned his back on him and walked slowly a few steps away. When he swung around and spoke again, his anger seemed more intense to the degree that it was quieter, and only Lundrigan remained unstartled by it.

"May God forgive," Cowley said, "the whole overeducated, ineffectual, and faithless pack of you. You've punished the children who at least stood up *against* me, or against something, while you, the rest of you, couldn't bring yourselves to do even that. You were like Julie, not wanting to know one way or the other whether there really was a God, but you didn't have the strength she did to stay away. Instead you came, and only in your tepid hearts hoped you'd see nothing because life is easier that way, easier not knowing. Sam wasn't the only one because you were all asleep, and if the angel of the Lord had appeared himself with a flaming sword, you'd never have seen him because all you could see was the children, and maybe you thought they were pretty or maybe you didn't, but that was all you saw. You saw nothing, and that very fact meant nothing to you."

"And what should it have meant?" Lundrigan asked. "My own simple reaction to seeing nothing would be simply that there was nothing to see."

"It meant," said Cowley, and he spoke more evenly now, "that you didn't look far enough."

"Whereas you, on the other hand, did, you mean." As if for the first time, Lundrigan seemed to come aware that he

had an audience, that Sara and Julie were still sitting there, that Sam remained standing near the tray's wreckage, and he too moderated his tone. "What did you see then, looking so far?"

"That I was wrong," Cowley said, "but not as wrong as you, I think."

"Oh?" Lundrigan looked to his friends for support, but they said nothing.

"I expected too much, you see," Cowley said, "but you expected too little. I had thought," and he paused here, looking from one of them to the other, "that if the world was ever going to be salvaged from the destructions and despairs of unbelief, if it was ever going to follow the directions of Christ again--and I shouldn't say *again* because we have never followed them, never, but start following them now, and for the first time—if this was ever to happen, there would have to be a miracle. I mean miracles," he said, "and not one but many because many and far apart are the men who need them. That's what I thought, and that's what I took you with me this afternoon believing."

"And now," Lundrigan said. "What do you believe now?"

Cowley had crossed to the piano and sat on its bench with his shoulders squared and his fingers motionless upon the keys as though he were about to play, but only resting them there, looking out through the windows before him. Were strangers to have entered at this moment as a little while ago Peter and his companions had, they too might easily have been deceived into thinking that the room was empty, so silent its occupants were.

"Today there wasn't any miracle. Each one of you has told me that in your own way, but you didn't need to because I knew it. But, before, there was," he said. "You can say I was dreaming, or you can say like Dick it was something I invented unconsciously, out of loneliness, but believe me I was never so awake or ever so conscious. And I wasn't lonely. Why, I can remember it was as if each single blade of grass and every leaf on the tree were facts I dealt with separately; there was nothing that wasn't real to me for the length of that moment, and so whatever didn't happen today *did* happen then. Oh I promise you that. Though sometimes now," he paused and ran his left hand silently and slowly down the scale, "I think it didn't happen because of me, because I was there, but in spite of it; that it would have happened anyway, and it was just by chance I was there to see it. Like a shooting star that doesn't fall because you're watching it, but falls, and maybe you're watching it and maybe you're not. And I was, by the grace of God, watching then, and I saw it. But my mistake was to think I could somehow make it happen again. It didn't. Only the children came. And you ask me what I believe now, and I'll tell you.

"I believe," he said, and he rose to tell them this, "that there aren't going to be any miracles because ours is a world where they'd probably do more harm than good, where we just can't expect them to happen any more except, as if the Lord couldn't quite resist them completely, maybe once in a while when there's nobody around but some poor fool like me, some lucky, lonely fool who's not going to convince any-

body anyway." He spoke only to Lundrigan now, who returned his glance as directly as it was given. "But whatever my feeling used to be, I no longer believe—and that's what I had to look a lot farther to see—that miracles are our only hope or even our hope at all. What we've got already is enough."

"And what is that?" Lundrigan asked. "What have we already got?"

"The words," said Cowley, "and the example of Christ."

Lundrigan gave an exaggerated sigh of resignation and turned away from him. "It's just a question of semantics," he said. "You pose the greatest problem of all—how is the world to be made a better and happier place—and then, so help me, instead of answering it, you come out with a word that has absolutely no meaning whatever but only a kind of emotional force at which the mind is supposed to stop working and the heart to start palpitating. 'Christ' you say, and that is no answer at all. It is meaningless," he exclaimed, "and your problem remains because you have said nothing!"

"The problem remains because I have *done* nothing," Cowley replied, "because none of us have."

"Speak for yourself," said Lundrigan. "You have done nothing, true, except wait for the world to be saved by some sort of mass-production vision, to say now that the cure-all for the world's ills is a wonder drug named Christ, but there are some of us who've taken a more active part than that. Our ideas aren't your ideas because we're more interested in educating the world than in throwing your kind of happy

dust in its eyes, but at least we've tried to do something about it, and in specific, unsensational terms the world can understand."

"You've been trying a long time," Cowley said.

"What about you?" Lundrigan played with the ring on his finger. "You've been trying Christ for two thousand years, and where are you?"

"No," Cowley said, "we've never tried Him. To the great degree that He too was specifically and unsensationally telling us how to live a good and happy life, we have never followed Him at all."

"And now?"

"Now we must try," he answered.

Lundrigan was on the point of speaking further when he was interrupted by Harry Fogg, who came rushing back into the room without warning. Julie and the Dunns had remained silent and unmoving throughout the conversation but were set in motion once more by the new arrival, who stood near the windows where the curtains blew against his bare legs.

"She's gone," he announced, and they were relieved to be able to ask him who had gone and where and why. Mollie Purdue had gone, he explained, and back to wherever it was she had come from, the city, and why? Why, because she had heard enough of their talk to feel sure that she had offended them beyond the possibility of forgiveness, to have no doubt but that Mrs. Dunn would no longer require her services, and off she had started, not even bothering to

change her clothes, but walking away as she was towards the station.

He repeated this information to them in the tones of a reproof, his voice uncertain and pitched too low for him as though at any moment his excitement would draw him into tears, but what he did not report was that she had not once said that there was anyone for whom she might have chosen, despite everything, to remain. He had stayed with her while she made her rapid preparations, throwing her clothes into her small suitcase, folding up Mrs. Dunn's white shawl and her sheet too and leaving them neatly on the bed, clapping on her navy-blue beret and then fluffing out the blonde ends of her hair beneath it, but she had said little he wanted to hear. "Take it easy, and maybe lay low for a little" were the only words he could remember her having addressed specifically to him, and now she was gone and, having told them this, he left the room as suddenly as he had entered it. Some minutes passed before anyone spoke.

"Well," Sara sighed at last, letting her arms fall helplessly over the arms of her chair, "this has been a truly lovely day. Do, one of you, go see if you can find her and persuade her to come back. I do really think—" but before she had finished, Julie, eager to escape, suggested quickly that since she and Lundrigan must leave anyway, they might as well look for Mollie on the way back themselves; and when this was agreed upon, they departed. Cowley had been standing by the piano with his back to them, but at Julie's farewell, he had turned about and, smiling, said goodbye to them both.

Shortly afterwards, protesting that he wanted no supper, he himself said goodnight and left.

They sat alone, Sara and Sam, and in silence watched the night wind blow harder until finally the first drops of rain began to fall, ticking against the panes and then, with a hiss, falling so rapidly that they started to wet the floor in front of the open windows. Sam arose and, having closed them, returned to his wife, carefully skirting the litter of broken glass that still lay on the carpet where the tray had fallen.

"Oh God," Sara exclaimed, "how perfectly dreadful. Even Peter isn't himself. I don't know when I'll be able to work again with Mollie gone. And Dr. Lavender's still here; we must get rid of him. I have never *spent* such a day."

"Reciting something prosaic and dull is sometimes comforting," Sam suggested. "For instance three times three is nine, three times four is twelve, three times five is fifteen . . ."

"And three times six is eighteen," Sara continued, "and three times seven is twenty-one, and twenty-one times twenty-one is one million and eight. Sam," she said, gesturing towards the tray's wreckage, "somebody will have to sweep all of this away."

"Yes," he replied, "all of this and more, and far, far away."

Chapter Thirteen

DR. LAVENDER held the egg for a moment because it felt pleasantly hot against his chilly hand, but in another moment it became rather too hot, and so he let it slip gently into the little socket of his egg-cup. After tapping a circular crack right around it with his butter knife, he removed the severed crown of shell, sprinkled a few grains of salt, and watched the warm yolk seep up through the coddled white as he tipped the end of his spoon into it. He tasted it then, and it was very good.

“Rain before seven stops,” he said, and smiled, buttering a piece of toast, “before eleven.”

There was little conversation at table that morning. The Dunns, as was their custom, breakfasted elsewhere in the house; Peter, having risen before the others, had already eaten and sat now in one of the rooms set aside for classes, reading over the section of Greek grammar in which he was shortly to start instructing the Uglies; and consequently there were none but the children to keep Dr. Lavender company. They were all there and all eating except for the little

McMoons, who merely sat in their high-backed chairs and watched in silence. They did not ordinarily arrive until later, but so early had they been sent to bed the night before that they had awoken, breakfasted and set off from home considerably before their usual hour. It had been raining then, and it continued to rain now, a soft and heavy falling down from gray skies. If Dr. Lavender had painted himself blue and eaten twenty eggs, shells and all, they would probably still not have noticed him, so carefully did they avoid looking in his direction. Indeed, it would have been difficult to have caught them looking even at one another.

Not until the meal was over and Dr. Lavender had left them briefly to confer with Cowley was there any talk among them, and then it came largely from Timmy McMoon. He it was who told them, as Harry Fogg had not, of Mollie's departure the night before, and he was able to go further still by adding, what not even Harry knew, that his mother and Mr. Lundrigan had discovered her walking through the rain and the dark and crying her head off—this last was Timmy's invention, and he found it very effective—and they had tried to persuade her to return with them, but she had refused. Her mind was made up, she had said, and it was bad luck anyway ever to start out on a journey and then not to finish it. The most she had been willing to promise was that she would telephone in a few days, and if Mrs. Dunn still wanted her then, she might, but only then, consider coming back. And so there had been nothing left to do but drive her on to the station, and from there she had left on a very fast train.

Timmy had barely finished speaking when, before his companions were able to reward him with any very satisfactory reaction, Dr. Lavender reentered the dining-room with Mr. Cowley. It was the first time that any of them except Harry had seen him since the preceding afternoon, and they were silent in his presence. To their relief, however, he introduced no subject that might have caused them pain but said simply that Rufus and Harry would come with him now for their Greek, and the rest of them would accompany Dr. Lavender, who had kindly offered . . . whom, Dr. Lavender himself interrupted, he had hoped they might be kind enough to accompany. Without adding any more to this, Peter left then and took the *Uglies* with him.

Dr. Lavender stood near the door with his hands hanging rather awkwardly at his sides, his shoulders slightly hunched, and regarded with a fading smile the long mahogany table. Nearest to him, and twisted about so that she might watch his face, sat Daisy McMoon. There was a white arc of milk on her upper lip, and with her hand she clasped one of the posts of her chair-back that was carved like an angry lion's mask. Next to her Ellie Sonntag bent over her plate and peered intently down at several crusts of toast which, with one torn-cuticed finger, she wiggled back and forth like pieces of a puzzle that she did not entirely understand. A tiny star of brilliance reflected from the electric light trembled in her glass of water. George Bundle and Timmy sat side by side across from the girls and pinched each other pensively under the table. Fendall tittered uneasily.

"Well now, and we are gathered together at last," Dr.

Lavender said and moved over to the table where he laid his hand on Ellie's head. She started as though struck but did not change her position while he twisted a lock of her straight hair about his finger as if to give her a topknot like his own. He reached down to her plate and picked up the crusts, which he put into his pocket. "These can be for the little birds," he said. "These," he continued and walked to the window, where he stood for a few minutes watching the rain, watching the slender stream of water that still spouted from the beak of the stone swan, "can be for the . . . but not for that one. And not today because today is too wet even for stone birds," he laughed a little, silently, "whereas yesterday . . . Where will we go?" he concluded abruptly, turning towards them.

"Do you mean where will we go yesterday?" asked Fendall, and even Ellie could not help but laugh at his joke.

"If it had been a good day," Dr. Lavender went on, smiling, "I would have chosen the garden because a garden's a good place for the heart to tell its secrets in, and the sunlight's a surplice there and the sound of the wind in the leaves is an epithalamium. But those are big words I don't suppose you know, and it's raining anyway, so you must tell me some other place."

"The best place for secrets," said Fendall with the confident intonations of triumph at being the only one of all of them who had the courage to speak up to the old man, "is my mother's secret room! She doesn't even know we know about it, but we do because I told them."

"That's pretty good, Fendall," George Bundle whispered with derision. "You've only lived here all your life!"

"Nobody ever told me," said Dr. Lavender.

"Why of course not!" Fendall exclaimed. "You're not even one of us."

"I know it." Dr. Lavender looked with disconcerting intensity into the boy's dark eyes. "I know I'm not."

"No," Fendall agreed, but with less conviction than before. Dr. Lavender said nothing.

"Well let's show it to him anyway," George Bundle broke in more loudly than he had intended.

"Yes, let's!" seconded Timmy.

"Let's, let's!" cried Daisy, wide-eyed and quite carried away by this sudden reversal.

"Oh be quiet," said her brother.

"No, no," Fendall protested. "I'll show him. You can all follow me!" and, fearing that any delay might lose him his chance, he rose from the table so quickly that he upset his unfinished glass of milk.

"See what you did," Ellie breathed with horror, recoiling in order to avoid the dripping stream.

"Oh damn that!" Fendall was already at the door. "Are you coming or not?"

"We're coming," said Dr. Lavender, and with Daisy pushing him from behind and the two boys crowding Fendall in front he left the room surrounded. Ellie followed a little to the rear.

They passed down corridors into the shellac- and plaster-littered studio cluttered with the great stone toys of granite cockerel, satyr, goddess, and never dallied there but descended instead the narrow, hidden stairway into, dearly

beloved, he thought, very mystery, and then he saw that secret room, all grayly lit and rain-hymned, as almost a miracle and raised his outspread hands to the level of his eyes at the sight of it alone. Such poppy eyes, just like a fish, George Bundle thought, and watched his hands swim towards them and away as Fendall Dunn took candles he had thought to bring and set them on the platform where, in lumpy clay, another Mollic stood all bare and with her long arms reaching out. It was clever of Fendall to have brought the candles which he was lighting now from a box of matches disguised with many wrappings around of string, because nobody else would have had the idea, but after all, George Bundle told himself, Fendall had lived in the house all his life, and so of course he would know better than anybody else what rooms were apt to be dark and where you would need a candle and where you would not. So they all stood around and watched the two needles of flame dully pierce the dense gray light of morning that misted the soft stone walls and blurred the ceiling slits of glass where the rain fell with the muffled rhythms of silence.

Dr. Lavender had to keep his face rigid lest it fall apart, and so there was no smile but only a straight line of mouth as he stepped up on the platform, flickering the flames, and raised one hand before him while with wondering eyes the children saw him there, and once again George Bundle thought of ghosts, of death that you found in the sun and turned with a stick to be sure. Ellie recalled the wickedness of yesterday when there had been no hand upon her head, and Daisy touched her brother's arm like a spider. Fendall

stood a little in front of them, his hands on his hips and his feet wide apart, adoring the candles.

“Your lesson this morning,” Dr. Lavender said with immense deliberation, “is not in geography, or in arithmetic, or in spelling, but . . .” and the extreme effort with which he had been restraining his expression seemed suddenly to break, since for the first time he looked directly at them and with a smile so gentle and intense that it was as if he had seen an old friend enter, “but in happiness,” he concluded. “And that is a lesson they don’t teach you in school because they think there is no need, and of course in a way they are right: as you are now, you can’t any more help being happy than a dream can help being dreamed. But you will not always be as you are now. Did you know that?” he asked them, searching the fascinated bewilderment of their faces. “Did you know that you would change someday? Yes, yes, you know it, you have been told about it, but you don’t believe it. It’s hard even for me, and I . . .” his smile returned more faintly as he paused without finishing his sentence.

“But you will,” he continued. “You will change because the heart changes. And the body, but that doesn’t matter. What is the body? It is this,” he said, and he lay his hand against the gray cheek of Mollie’s blind, unfinished face, “this,” he repeated and ran his fingers across his own chest, “a little clay and a little dying.” He leaned down and picked up one of the candles so that the flame wavered and the shifting shadows made the expression of Mollie’s effigy seem to come almost alive.

“It is not the body but the heart that matters. You

change," he repeated, "because the heart changes. You become, you know, like what you love, remember that, remember that, and after a time the heart begins to love things that are not happy, things like wisdom and death, like beauty and the past, and then—see!" he blew out the candle, "happiness is gone!" He stood there several minutes watching them in silence, his eyes round with surprise.

"Listen to me now," he said, "because this is your lesson for the morning. Happiness must be brought back to the world, and it is you who will do it. You who are children are happy because you still love only happy things, your hearts have not yet begun to change, and they must not change. They *will* not change," his voice rose, "because I will teach you how to love only happiness, and then, because you become like what you love, you will be only happy!"

"Little children," he cried, "love one another! Forget me and Mr. Cowley, forget all of us whose hearts have grown old, and love only one another. Then, through you, by loving only the happiness in one another, it will become a world of children, young ones and old ones too, and happiness will be perpetuated upon it, and innocence, and the Lord will reign."

And the Lord will rain, thought Ellie Sonntag. Dr. Lavender was not speaking now so she had time to think about what he had said, and she knew that it was very serious because all the children had very serious faces now, even Fendall, who was usually rude no matter what. But she had no chance to think much more about it than that, for Dr. Lavender began again to speak.

"Will you come a little nearer?" he asked. They had all

been standing near the door by which they had entered, but at his request they moved closer to the platform, and he arranged them in a row there with Fendall in the middle, the girls on either side of him, and Timmy and George Bundle at the two ends. And this pleased Ellie because it was tidy, a boy, a girl, a boy, a girl, a boy, and so solemn that it was rather like church, she thought, with the candles, although only one of them was burning still, and the statue with its arms stretched out, and the room itself, the quietness, the coolness, the gray stone and dim light. Dr. Lavender was standing on the platform again, and his eyes, she noticed, were damp.

"Dearly beloved," he said, his hands clasped tight over his vest and looking up to where the raindrops were falling, "we are gathered together here in the sight of God to join child to child in a marriage of innocence, a wedding of young and unchanged hearts which, by loving only one another, will never change, but may persist, through better and worse, through richness and poverty, through sickness and health, in the happiness and purity that comes of loving only that which is happy and pure. Jesus said, 'whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me,' and so these little children, by receiving each other in the bonds of holy and mystical wedlock, receive Him too and live His word.

"Now take each other by the hands," he said, and so they did, still standing in a row before him.

Ellie slipped off her glasses because it was her wedding and wondered which exactly was to be her particular husband, for Dr. Lavender had not made this clear, but decided at last

that it must be George Bundle, who was one of the two standing beside her, and pressed his hand more tightly than Fendall's, who was also standing beside her. Mrs. Bundle, she thought, and in a deepening dream, for it was all now like a dream to her, she saw his feathery, brown cowlick and dazed eyes as part of what she suddenly must love and might blush with pride to love as something that would soon be hers alone. She tried to convey all of this in one quick sidelong glance which, however, he failed, in his own preoccupation, to see. But she was happy beyond all disappointment and with rare unselfconsciousness, while Dr. Lavender stood with his head bowed, began to sing. There should at such a time be music, it seemed to her, and so she started now in a clear if timorous voice, her glance lowered, with *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, and as the melody rose almost too high for her to manage, she looked up for a moment towards Dr. Lavender and saw him smiling down at her. She continued to sing even after he had begun to address them once more, but more softly now so that his mild voice could be heard above it, and if the others regarded her queerly, she did not notice them.

"Those whom God hath joined together let no man," he said, looking from face to face, "put asunder."

A drop of tallow fell on his shoe, and his shoulder itched until he touched it with his thumb. Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinner . . . There was a time when he might have stood with them where they were standing, some other standing here where he was, but that time had passed, everything, all of it passed, fell in pieces, died. Reconciled was the

end of it, he thought, but it had been a long time coming. He covered his face with his hands. There was a little remainder of egg beneath his lower lip, and he licked it away, just grazing his palm with his tongue. "Defunct" was the sound a stone tossed into water made, and in his mind he heard that sound again as he remembered sitting by the sunlit pond and telling Peter, the stone sinking bright past the incurious eyes of carp, that it was only a little thing he was doing, and that even if his vision appeared again, it would be only a little thing that he had done. But it had not appeared again, and that was a big thing. Defunct. Peter had failed, and although they had not yet so much as mentioned it to one another, surely, Dr. Lavender thought, Peter must know that he had failed, had seen, done, nothing, and that it was for him, for Dr. Lavender himself, to succeed now for them both. And here in a secret room, with the sounds of Ellie's song and the rain gentle in his ears, he had found his way and stood with his face in his hands, waiting for strength.

He would not want to stand very much longer before sitting down, sitting so that all the muscles in his back relaxed, legs and arms sprawled, and only the neck remained stiff to hold the head high, the head to keep the eyes goggling, the mouth alive, the wisp of whitened hair rising, as he had once seen a marble god in a fountain rise, to join the triumph in the skies. And glory as well to the new-born day that lay still birth-damp with rain but would, by eleven, be summer again with the sun crooning down on the paraphernalia of gardens, all the green and guinea-gold of the earth's July. As if to such a scene, he uncovered his face.

"Forasmuch," he slowly said, "as these children have in the silence of the heart pledged their troth, each to the other, and have declared the same by joining hands before me and their God, I pronounce that they are one another's, and the world theirs, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

"Amen," whispered Ellie Sonn^{ag}.

Chapter Fourteen

COWLEY's Greek lesson was hardly a successful one. For a time he had conscientiously tried, and his two pupils with him, to concentrate upon the problems of translating from one language into the other sentences involving, for the most part, the number of parasangs variously traveled by soothsayers, hoplites and kings; but what would start as silent puzzlings over such grammatical complexities as these shifted so frequently, for both Cowley and the boys, into glassy-eyed speculations upon subjects at once more poignant and immediate that finally, after an especially prolonged pause, they dropped the pretense of study altogether and spoke instead of what concerned them most. Cowley himself had initiated this change by laying his grammar face-down upon the table and, after giving a little parodied groan of incapacity and smiling then to see them smile, saying that they did not, he guessed, need a soothsayer to tell them that this was not going very well or why it was not. It had been a complicated week, he said, but that was over now, and soon all would be again as it had been. And then without, to their gratitude, waiting

for them to make some response to this, without obliging them, with a pause, to apologize for, or even to explain, their part in what he had referred to no more specifically than as complication, he went on to tell them what he himself had made of it.

More briefly, and in gentler terms than he had used the evening before, he told Rufus and Harry, as he had told their elders earlier, how he felt that he was wrong in what he had expected, prayed, to see on his hill that past afternoon, and how he had come at last to understand, kneeling there when all of them had gone, that it was rather a matter of cherishing and, above all, acting upon what was already had, than of hoping for, and pathetically, helplessly depending upon, what was not. "There's a fable," he had said, "about a dog who had a bone. You know it probably, how he was walking along with it safe in his mouth when all of a sudden he came to the banks of a little river. There was no way of getting across except over a low foot-bridge, so he took that, and then, while he was trotting along, happened to look down at the calm water and saw there a reflection of that fine, mouth-watering bone of his that he was carrying. It must have looked really tasty to him because he stopped still and couldn't take his eyes off it but just kept on gazing at it until finally he couldn't hold back any longer. And then before he knew what he was doing, he'd dropped his real bone and lunged down to catch that shadow glimmering on the surface of the water. And you know the rest," he had said, "or you can make a good guess. He lost the bone he had and didn't, poor old dog, get the reflection either." He had paused there,

and Rufus reflectively traced with his pencil the grain of the table-top, Harry, his hair falling in two crescents on his forehead, gazed at the floor, as they had waited for him to continue. "That's what they all thought had happened to me," he had gone on, "and I must say there were a few minutes there when I thought it might have myself, but it didn't. You know," and his speculative tone had become suddenly so direct that they looked quickly up at him, "I did in my way just what the dog did, but I lost nothing. And that was the miracle." His listeners had time to do no more than murmur pensive and largely inarticulate appreciation of whatever wisdom they found these few remarks to contain, before Cowley had said that they might as well simply finish the remaining sentences by themselves some time before the next day, the lesson was over, and they could, if they wanted, go.

Because the rain had almost stopped by this time and only a fine spray continued to mist down from the low sky, they went outside and, finding none of the other children yet about, took refuge, just the two of them, beneath the great chestnut tree that grew at the far side of the pond. The foliage remained heavy with rain, and Rufus, a little drunk still at the joy of having been released by Cowley after so short a lesson, took hold of one of the lower branches and pulled it with such vehemence that a whole storm of drops came scattering down upon them both. He laughed giddily at this and was in the act of displaying with mock horror the wet ruin of his open shirt when, plucking forward two little folds of it and grimacing absurdly, he noticed for the first

time the disconsolate aloofness of Harry, who simply crouched there on his haunches, staring without expression at the grass and saying nothing. The effect upon Rufus was instantly sobering, for his own jubilance seemed to him suddenly of unforgivable crassness. He squatted down beside his friend and asked him, without needing an answer, what his trouble was.

Behind his glasses his eyes grew dim with compassion, and his short upper lip nearly trembled with the effort of keeping closed his small and ever-open mouth as he heard Harry tell him in the blunt monosyllables of despair that she was gone, the blonde girl, and would never again come back. He studied the profile that he had long before memorized, the large eye and faintly turned-up nose, the timorous chin and full, tight lips, reflecting with his own finer features the evidences of suffering he thought to behold there. She had gone, Harry told him, and although for a moment in the woods the day before, a moment that he described for the first time here to Rufus, she had, he was sure, almost loved him, had laid her hand on his neck even and thus in silence said as much, there could be little hope now that they would ever meet again. And still worse it was that she had never once gone so far as to express such a hope before setting off alone into the night and crying, crying perhaps, if Timmy's report was to be trusted, but not for loss of him, out of hurt, instead, at the Dunns' displeasure and the sense of her own wrongdoing.

Rufus heard this not so much as a story whose details he would ordinarily have pursued with all his usual zeal at know-

ing whatever there was to be known about this only other Ugly, but rather as simply the expression of a grief more profound than could ever be adequately explained by any particular series of events however unfortunate. At fourteen he believed that it was, above all, sadness which might be most confidently expected of life by anyone who, as the result of some special gift of understanding, was isolated from the majority of his fellows; and since he considered no one, not even himself, so gifted in this way as Harry, it was to Harry that he constantly looked, as indeed he looked now, for revelations of a grief that was truly and splendidly ennobling. His entire face, smaller than Harry's and seemingly smaller still beneath his weight of dark red hair, was contorted by sympathy as, instead of elaborating upon the circumstances of his dilemma, he only stressed now, in the minutely earnest voice with which they always addressed one another in privacy, that quality in his friend which appeared to them both to explain and to dispel any misadventure that might befall him. Oblivious of the slow haze of tiny rain and supporting himself where he crouched with one hand just touching the damp grass between his feet, he reminded Harry that he was, for better or for worse, a poet and that he must, as such, expect things like this to continue happening forever yet see them too as supremely unimportant in terms of what he was and what he would become. Mollie might be gone, and maybe he was right in thinking that he would never see her again, Rufus told him, but what of that? "A poet, an Ugly," he said, "can survive anything, and let the world go hang

anyway. Uglies understand." They looked straight at each other with this and suddenly then laughed at themselves, at each other, at how wet they were, how alone, how wise.

Rufus's gaiety returned with the success of his consolation, and he gave Harry a little push that made him lose his balance and fall over on the ground. "Nothing matters, nothing, *nothing*, to an Ugly," Rufus said, and "Oh you are right!" Harry exclaimed, tearing a handful of grass and throwing it into the air above their heads. "Uglies sometimes pretend things matter, but they really don't. They really don't matter at all or ever." And then they laughed a little more because this was their way and because not even Mollie mattered, nor Rufus's advice either. Harry remained lying on the grass where he had tumbled, his knees up and his head turned a little to the side so that he could see Rufus sitting beside him.

"You know," he said, "poor Cow's a real comedian."

"Poor Cow," Rufus agreed. "He *is*, you know."

"Everything's so serious to him."

"Somebody should take all his clothes off," Rufus speculated, "and paint him green and then make him do some kind of dance."

"Almost any kind would work, I think, and it would be terribly good for him."

"Terribly good. And just think of all the other people it would be good for too!"

"Yes," Harry continued, "because if you tried to strip a person naked and paint him green, he'd absolutely have to tell you exactly what he thought, and that would be won-

derful because people hardly ever tell you exactly what they think."

"That's not very original, but it's true of course."

"No, but it would be a whole new way of getting people to say what they really feel."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean doing something really horrible to them," Harry explained, "like throwing up in their soup or taking their favorite and most expensive vase and breaking it over their heads; something really nasty like going up to your hostess at a party with something the dog did on the rug and dropping it down the front of her dress. . . ."

"And then maybe squishing it around a little," said Rufus, delighted.

"Exactly! So that no matter how polite she was, she'd *have* to tell you the truth! Before she'd have a chance to think better of it, she'd come out with a really genuine, frank comment, and then you might get to be very good friends, or at least very good enemies. At least you'd know just where you stood with her."

"And *she'd* know where you stood. I'd love to try it on Mr. Dunn," Rufus said, "or Dr. Lavender."

"Or Cow," said Harry. "Poor Cow." And they continued for a time devising atrocities they might commit, obscenities they might phrase, in order to elicit an authentic response from the astounded victim.

Entirely confident now of having returned his friend to himself and eager to prove his success, Rufus made the error of finally drawing Mollie's name back into the conversation.

There were some people, he suggested, whose natural manner was so nearly as striking as these more contrived vulgarities the two of them had been considering that they frequently, without even trying, achieved the same results. And Mollie, he continued, with the disconcerting imperfections of her speech, and her directness, came close to being one of them. Harry agreed with this, was able even to laugh a little, but added that she was of course beautiful too, and that tended, he thought, to suppress rather than encourage the kind of truthful response which ugliness, on the other hand, the sudden, ugly act, shocked into expression. Beautiful . . . Rufus repeated the word with pensive uncertainty. He was not sure, he said, that this was the word he would himself have chosen to describe her, or, if so, that hers was the kind of beauty which, and he tried to muffle the hilarity that began to shake his voice as he thought of how he would describe it, "the kind of beauty," he said, "that you'd like to go to bed with but would cut up then in little pieces and flush down the toilet." He settled his glasses more firmly on the short bridge of his nose, tipped his face back, and abandoned himself to squeaking appreciation of his own remark. The surface of the pond spread uncannily soft and smooth beneath the mist, and his laughter carried rich across it towards the slope of lawn. Further away, the dark roof of the house glistened with moisture, and the motionless air continued still fragrant and new with rain. Some minutes passed before he noticed the tears slowly twisting down Harry's cheek as he leaned his large head against the heel of his hand. It was all Rufus could do, swearing his contrition, to keep

from weeping himself, and for a time they simply crouched there together in silent grief.

"It's not what you said," Harry began unsteadily at last, "but just the whole thing. She's gone, and I've lost her. I'm like Cow's dog. I tried to get her, and I lost not only her but everything. She's what I wanted more than I'll ever want anything again, and now I've lost it all. Everything. Like Cow. Oh, Rufus . . ."

"No," Rufus replied and laid his hand lightly upon his friend's shoulder, "you haven't lost anything. Cow said he hadn't, and neither have you. Don't you understand what he meant by his story about the dog? That if it's only a shadow you love, the way the dog loved the reflection of his bone, why then of course you won't be able to catch it, but of course you have to try to or otherwise you'll never know that it is only a shadow. And that's all Mollie was to you really." He continued for a while longer, this small cartographer of the heart's geography, trying to explain to his friend, whose eyes, pink with grief, rolled towards him from time to time, that he had never loved Mollie but only the idea of loving her; that he had lost nothing because he had had nothing. Wherever he was able, he used, for the authority it seemed to give his words, Cow's fable, Cow's pronouncement that he himself had suffered no loss. "It's all terribly sad," he said at last, "but," and he paused then in desperate search for some way of bringing his speech to a successful close, "you *learn* from sadness, Cow learned and so will you, and," but again he paused, still not convinced that he had succeeded, "and anyway," he brightened, "there's nothing

like sadness, you know, and suffering, to improve the style. This struck them both as an observation of such truly epigrammatic elegance that even Harry was distracted by it for a moment into forgetting his pain.

"It does," he said, smiling. "But oh, oh . . ." His groan, this time, however, was at least in part a conscious parody. "So sad, sad, sad," he sighed. "Uglies are so sad. Such ugly things happen to them."

"Oh I know!" Rufus replied with passion, and then they both hunched up their shoulders, puckered their mouths into minute buttons of terror, opened their eyes wide as though in fearful apprehension, and cringed there, making little exclamations of wonder and despair at one another in order to demonstrate the ludicrous hopelessness of what they considered, and laughed now quite uncontrollably to consider, their plight.

"At least there are *two* Uglies," Harry said at last, "and thank goodness for that!"

"They laugh together, and they cry together, and sometimes they do both at the same time. Only another Ugly can tell which."

"And when the whole world goes up in flames," Harry mused, "the way it does in that opera, and the fire is licking around the sides of the last and tallest hill and the music is crashing around like a thunderstorm, all of a sudden you'll see two little figures running towards each other beneath the huge, burning sky, and they will be . . ."

". . . the Uglies," Rufus softly said, and Harry thought

again of Mollie, not without a pang, but differently now, more 'ke a shadow he had lost and learned through losing.

It would be impossible to say how long they might have "mained there under the chestnut tree had they not caught sight of several of the other children who had emerged from the house and were standing indecisively on the upper lawn as though looking for the two older boys. Rufus suggested, and Harry instantly agreed, that they should try to escape them, and so they started around the other side of the pond and, keeping close to the stone wall, passed through the gate and ran across the grass to the house itself. They were crouching there beneath one of the dining-room windows wondering whether their pursuers would pass this way and discover them or search first the area around the pond when they were struck by the sound of loud voices within. Noiselessly they raised themselves so that their eyes came just above the window-sill and peered into the room.

Mrs. Dunn stood there in a raincoat supporting herself with both hands on the tall back of one of the chairs, and across the room from her, leaning unconcernedly against the wall, was Fendall. In his right hand he held a tin cowboy pistol which he was carefully aiming at her head. Even before they heard her say anything, the Uglies were able to see simply by her expression the intensity of her exasperation.

"Put that down, Fendall!" she exclaimed, pointing at the pistol. "What do you mean by telling me such a story?"

"I mean what I said," answered her son, aiming now at the engraving that hung on the wall just behind her. "If you don't

believe me, you can go ask him yourself." Squinting his left eye expertly, he pulled the trigger with a click.

"I know I can ask him," Sara said, calming her voice with evident exertion, "but I'm certainly not going to till I'm absolutely sure you're not making the whole wild thing up. I thought that after last night you were going to behave yourself for a while."

"I have," Fendall said. "It wasn't my idea, it was his."

"Well, just tell me about it once more then," she pled.

"All right," he sighed with elaborate resignation, "I will. He took us all downstairs into your room and made a wedding."

"Dr. Lavender, you mean?"

"Of course."

"And just what kind of a wedding was it?"

"Oh, the regular kind, I guess."

"Were you in it?"

"We all were. He married us all, and then he cried a little so we left."

"And you were in it, I suppose?"

"Gosh," he said with disgust, "are you ever thick?" told you that three times," and pointing his gun at her head again, he clicked the trigger once for each of the three and then ran out of the room.

"Oh God, God, God!" cried Sara and turned around so quickly that the Uglies had to duck down to the ground in order to avoid being seen.

They exchanged glances of astonishment there where they crouched and then, after looking in gingerly a second time

and finding that the room was empty, started around to the front of the house to see what more they could discover. Had they thought, as in fact they did not, to walk as far as the library windows, they would have been gratified in their search since it was there that Sara came upon Sam and there that she told him of what Fendall had related.

Involved as she felt herself to be with the situation about which her mind continued unavoidably and incredulously to spin, she was able still to muster just enough dispassion to see it, to see the necessity of recounting it to Sam, as one of her rare opportunities for startling him into that complete awareness of herself with which he so seldom indulged her. Surely, it seemed to her, by informing him that his only son had, at the age of twelve and through the authority of an incontestably empowered clergyman, been, of all things, married, she might hope to succeed, where in general she failed, in forcing him to react to her with the absolute and vitally particular attention which he must of necessity feel her due as not only his sole source of immediate information on the subject but as the only person whose concern he could reasonably expect to be as great even as his own. So she hurried into the library, not even bothering to remove her raincoat or to brush the rain from her black hair, quite triumphantly prepared to make the most of it for him; and since she had already made a great deal of it for herself alone, the passion of her delivery was considerable.

The yellow light of the lamp coloring as it did the usual immobility of his expression, all the greater now for the slowness with which he seemed barely able to detach himself

from the small volume he had been reading, gave his face a peculiarly oriental impenetrability which only added to the zeal of Sara's resolve to shatter it. Dr. Lavender had clearly, she began without the mercy of even the briefest prologue, gone mad, and when she saw that this failed to arouse him to the degree towards which she aspired, she broke quickly in upon herself to describe to him precisely what evidence for his madness she had been given. Her growing disbelief in the tale she thus heard herself relating made her hesitate for moment, but remembering then the frighteningly plausible account of it that Fendall had supplied her, she found it possible to believe once more and to continue, her concern for Sam's reaction diminishing as her own concern over the fact itself increased, to tell him how the old man had taken them down to her secret room and performed there the ceremony which had, grotesque and incredible as it might be, nonetheless, she imagined, actually made of these ^{them} _{babies} ^{they} husbands and wives. And what, would he tell her, could be more horrifying than that? Something must be done, ^{and} _{it} done immediately.

No sooner had she finished speaking than Sam, remaining in his chair but pushing the lamp aside so that in the dimmer light of morning his expression might be more easily interpreted as seeming troubled by this information, asked her to repeat what she had said. Unable, to her annoyance, to sustain the same level of drama a second time, but equally unwilling to leave him before she was sure that he had fully understood, she started, rather drily, to tell him once more

what had apparently happened, when he interrupted her.

"I can't help wondering," he speculated, tapping his book against his knee, "which one Fendall got." Upon being sharply questioned as to what he meant by this, he rose from his seat and began to help her off with her coat as he continued. "I mean that if I had to choose between Daisy McMoon and the little Sonntag creature for him, and apparently I do," at this point his face broke into an enormous and, to Sara's mind, hideous grin, "I would plump rather fervently for Daisy, I think." Having laid her coat over the back of a chair, he stood behind her with his hands on her shoulders so that when she turned around, as now she abruptly did, he found their faces nearly touching and lapsed into his more restrained and characteristic smile.

"As if that made *any* difference, Sam!"

"Why I should think it made rather a great deal," he said, "to Fendall if not to us."

With very nearly as much surprise as Sara had originally hoped for from him, he watched the unparalleled speed with which she managed, never taking her eyes from his, to light a cigarette, blow a gust of smoke into the air above his head, pick up her coat and, finally, without saying a word, to leave the room—all of it in the manner of a single, contemptuous gesture. Once she was gone, he returned to his chair and reopened his book at the page he had marked with a paper of matches. There among a miscellany of scientific observations was what he considered to be one of Sir Thomas Browne's most sublime phrases, and he read it again, letting his eye run luxuriously over the richness of the archaic

orthography. "Ice splittes starrewise," he read, and then read it aloud to himself. He stretched his legs straight out before him, slumped down in his chair so that the coarse tweed of his jacket rose almost to his ears, and with the fingers of one hand lightly brushed across his silent lips. The day was clearing, and he turned his head slightly to behold it. Ice splittes starrewise, and if splitting vas necessary, he thought, there could be no better way. You needed only set your needle-sharp pick on the proper point of the frozen surface, and then the softest tap was sufficient to send the crooked fissures of snow radiating out in astral diagonals for the splendor of the moment before, with another tap, the icy segments finally split and fell apart into a ruined astronomy, the disintegration of a star. Taking a pencil from his pocket he wrote in the margin by the phrase that so occupied him the name "Thos. Lavender" in a neat and microscopic hand, and then, yawning, rose to his feet and replaced his volume in the shelves. Walking to the window, he looked out to see if he could discover the children while, somewhere in the house, he could hear, although he made no attempt to catch the words, the sound of Sara's voice.

It was in the dining-room hall that she had found Dr. Lavender, and she stood there now repeating her question to him.

"Is it true?" she asked. "Am I to believe that he was telling me the truth?" Her voice resounded from the narrow walls.

In his pocket he held a coin tight between his fingers, curled the first joint of his forefinger over it and pressed so hard that the edge stung his flesh, and what is truth, he vaguely

thought, as he noticed the pain and let the coin slip down against his handkerchief. The light in the hallway was dim, and there was a scent of luncheon, an unidentifiable fragrance that might have been simmering broth or veal cooked soft with mushrooms perhaps, he wondered which, and remembered the flayed heads of calves as he had seen them lying severed in the open markets of Europe with their great eyes rolling heavenwards like the eyes of saints and martyrs and their delicate mouths ajar just enough to disclose the anguished simper of teeth. His eyelids fluttered a little as he slowly smiled to recall Sara, who continued to stand there before him with her hair still damp with mist. Gently, with a warmth of sincere interest, he asked her what she had said.

Her impulse was to scream awake what she suddenly thought of as this house of somnambulists, but controlling her annoyance that was only the more profound now for the failure of her interview with Sam, she simply confronted him once more with Fendall's report and asked him for the third time whether or not it was true.

"True . . . ?" he repeated. "Yes," his eyes, swollen with feeling, stared out at her above his unsteady smile, "it is."

"Then are you crazy!" she cried. "Have you lost your wits completely even to think of such a thing let alone to do it, to take a group of innocent children and . . . marry them! Not even in my wildest dreams," her voice shook with strain, "could I have believed that such a thing was possible!"

He tried then, advancing a few steps with one arm outstretched as though to take her by the hand, to explain what he had done, but so complete was his astonishment at her

wrath that he was capable of no more than several incomplete phrases before she interrupted him.

"How could you," she said, and her voice came more rapidly now and less unrestrained, "you as a minister of the church, ever deceive yourself to the extent of really believing, as you must really have believed, that what you were doing was anything but a perfectly dreadful joke? Couldn't you see what the consequences of such an act would be not only as far as you're concerned, your own job at school and all that, but for the *children*? I simply cannot believe it even now," she went on, suddenly tired, and leaning against the wall for support, but then, as a new thought came to her, standing straight again. "You must know how impressionable they are and that they've certainly, even at their age, heard enough about marriage to realize at least some of what it involves in . . . well, in *every* way, and now there they are, Heaven knows where . . ." but she could go no farther. Bowing her head and covering her face with her hands, she was suddenly obliged, and to her own stupefaction, to suppress a smile. In an instant the thought had come to her that the whole matter was simply too ludicrous to take as seriously as she had chosen to take it, that perhaps the mildness of Sam's unconcern was, after all, the juster reaction, and that certainly she was speaking with excessive harshness to this old man whose motive, however extraordinary, she had not even tried to comprehend. She must address him again and without hysteria. There must be some kind of understanding between them. But when she looked up, she found that Dr. Lavender had gone.

When he stepped out of the front door into the morning, he discovered Harry and Rufus standing tentatively there near the little fountain and asked them if they knew where he might find the other children. Down there, Harry told him, pointing towards the woods across the pond, in the tree-house probably, for he and Rufus had seen them run off in that direction, had heard them shout this as their destination. And Dr. Lavender, without remembering to thank them, started walking down the pebbled path towards the upper lawn. The grass wet his shoes, and he could see cut blades of it adhering to the leather. The air was still cool, the foliage ponderously green, with the memory of rain, and the mist had in the main disappeared. He thought, as he descended, of the small wooden figures which, when you placed them at the top of an incline, would shuffle mechanically down to the bottom where, unless you were careful to smooth their way, they were apt to fall flat on their wooden faces. He stepped down through the gate in the wall and continued towards the pond.

That Sara Dunn was wrong in what she had said, he knew, but still, to make certain, he must see the children themselves and, by speaking to them, reassure himself that they had understood, that he had been right in doing with them as he had done. Convinced as he was, despite all the weight of Sara's indignation, of the blessed and divinely inspired significance of the marriage he had performed for the sake alone of a stricken world, her words, her disbelief, drove him to seek out the children, and he sought them now by running as best he could about the pond's shadowed edge, for con-

firmation from them of the wisdom and truth of his design.

Resting for a moment with his arms about a slender maple, the damp bark cold against his forehead, he hurried on into the wood where the leaves he brushed scattered rain upon him and his feet sank into the soft, moss-covered earth. He heard voices somewhere before him and called out to them, but his breath was short with running, and there was no answer, only the chattering of birds he could not see, the continued banter in the distance of the voices he had tried to hail and hastened towards now, slipping once on a glistening rock but steadyng himself and moving onward. All of summer seemed to enclose him there with the fragrance of decaying wood and wet sod, and the trees leaned low with their abundance of dark and foliate branch to imperil his way, but he came at last, his glasses clouded and the wisps of his hair flat with moisture upon his scalp, to the clearing where, high in the limbs of a tall oak, the children's tree-house rose before him.

"Look, look!" they cried, crawling to the outermost limit of the deck of yellow boards and peering down through the leaves at him. "Let him up!" one of them shrilled, but there was dissension at this and cries of "No, no, never!" and "Yes, yes!" and the hollow thumping of some small fist against the planks. Daisy tossed down her handkerchief, and the excitement of their voices shivered the still air as it floated downwards.

"I must see you!" Dr. Lavender called, his head tossed back and cupping his mouth with his bark-stained hands. "Please," he cried, "it's all I ask!" And then, as the uproar

increased, he took hold of one of the thin rungs of the rope-ladder and began to climb. You know that I did what was best, he would say, and, wedded now in joy and innocence, the world is yours, my dears, and you the Lord's, you understand this, and he looked down as he thought these words and saw the earth already far beneath him and a rock with tiny white flowers growing around it. Climbing another rung, he found their faces almost near enough to touch and smiled up at them, glimpsing the sky for a moment, stretched out his hand towards them, and then, with a snapping of rope and a quick recoil above, lost hold and fell.

He lay on his back, his arms flung out in the grass to either side and one side of his face pillow'd against the stone he had looked down upon a moment earlier. There was no movement from him nor any sound, and the children were silent too, craning through the leaves to see what had happened and hearing only the sound of their own hushed breathing. Daisy was the one who finally spoke.

“Look,” she cried, her voice a high-pitched lament, a wail of compassion and regret keen through the damp summer air, “he has broken his glasses!” Her brother silenced her.

Chapter Fifteen

JULIE McMOON sneezed. Dressed in a largely unironed cotton dress with a dust-cloth tucked in the belt and wearing her bedroom slippers, she moved about her small living-room with a jar of insecticide which she sprayed rather erratically here and there about her, sending a cloud rolling towards the window-screen, another into the hall where several of the children's sweaters lay unfolded upon a low chest, and yet another up towards a patch of ceiling where two mosquitoes clung near the crushed remains of a third whose blood made a tiny stain on the white plaster.

"Have you finished with the breakfast things?" she called through the dining-alcove into the kitchen, whose swinging door was propped open with a painted wooden chair. Her voice was even more nasal than usual as the result of her cold and the fumes of the spray, and, prevented by blowing her nose from hearing Lundrigan's reply, she asked him to repeat it. Egg, he called back, his words brisk above the sound of running water, was difficult enough to get off even

without the complication of cigarette ashes, and as if to stress this claim he let two dishes slip together with a clatter.

"You think that's bad," she said. "You should see this room. I don't know how I'll ever get things straightened out enough to leave—ever."

"For this evening or for good do you mean?"

"Oh either," she sighed, "though I meant for good."

"I'll be right there," Lundrigan promised. "I'm almost done."

Julie sent one more random puff out into the sunlit morning air and then started trying to put the room into some kind of order. Timmy's fishing line hung over the edge of the piano and placing it, coiled into a ring secured by the rusty hook itself, in a table drawer, she exhaled a little breath of amused resignation at the ineffectuality of her gesture and picked up a photograph to dust it. She was distracted by the sight of her own face reflected darkly in the glass and held it for a moment before her. Partially fused with the picture beneath, her large eyes glinted moistly in a puzzled stare, and the slender line of her jaw cut away a corner of the summer lawn and the wicker chair upon it. In the chair sat a young man in his thirties dressed for tennis, the dead white of his shirt almost entirely obscuring her freckled mouth curved now into an unconscious half smile. His head was thrown back in laughter, and on his lap, with both hands clutching her father's arm, lay a baby barely recognizable as Daisy. A film of dust in the corner seemed to descend like a shower of stars upon them, and Julie flicked this away with her cloth and replaced the photograph on the table.

"You're really leaving then?" said Lundrigan, entering.

"Oh yes," she answered after gazing at him incomprehendingly for a moment, "I *really* am. Your vacation will be over in a few days so you'll be going back to the city, and this just isn't a place for the kids any more with all that's happened, at least not for now. So we'll go away somewhere for a while, I don't know where, but . . ."

"Somewhere," said Lundrigan curtly.

"Somewhere."

Together they tried to pull straight the slipcover of the sofa. It was not so much simply that she was going away that troubled Lundrigan, but, rather, that she was going for reasons with which he himself had nothing to do.

"A man has a vision," he said, "or thinks he has, then tries to arrange another—a sort of heavenly impresario, a celestial Ziegfeld—and fails. Then another man, an old one this time and a minister, goes a little berserk and marries some children to one another. The mothers have a series of minor fits, the old man tries to climb up a tree and in the process falls and . . . breaks his neck. Dies with the children looking on. Very sad, yes, and certainly unsettling, but not a reason for you to pack up and leave. No, these are *foolish* things that have happened, Julie, even death can be foolish sometimes, and you'd be making a mistake if you acted upon them as though they were anything else."

It startled him to recognize, as he could not help but do even as he spoke, what was actually his complete lack of conviction as to either the truth or merely the importance of what he was advising her. Shortly after Dr. Lavender's death

several days earlier, she had announced to him her intention of going elsewhere with the children for the rest of the summer, and although his immediate reaction was that this was as reasonable a decision as any other she might choose to make, he had begun even then to try to dissuade her from it. Why he continued to act towards her with such duplicity was a question that he had hesitated at first to answer, endeavoring instead to see his insistence upon the folly of her plan as something in which he truly believed; but, failing in this, he was obliged, as together they set about tidying the littered room, to look farther into his motive.

It had been as they were all walking back from the scene of Cowley's failure on the hill that he had come first to a sense of being himself, more than Cowley, more than any other there, the one who had most failed. There he was, he had thought, Richard Lundrigan: not by any means the least successful of the city's younger editors; respected, if occasionally envied, sometimes even disliked, among his colleagues; discriminatively friended; maturely self-sufficient and, above all perhaps, reasonable, it seemed to him, a thoroughly reasonable man—yet there he had stood on the edge of a field with the sun going down and a light breeze blowing, sick and angry at the realization that it was somehow he who had lost most heavily through a situation which, and in the presence of people whom, he considered fantastic, for the most part childish, and hence, as by every right they should have been, incapable of touching him at all. But they had touched him, and in a manner he had never anticipated. On one side, he felt, there was Cowley, inept, deceived, emo-

tionally, insecure, words he tended always to use in a group, and he had gone even so far as to tell him this honestly, to warn him, as they had stood up to their shoulders in the dark sea, against proceeding with a design that could only do him harm. And on the other side, Lundrigan knew, there was himself. It was a curious competition that he felt to exist between them and no less disturbing to him because Cowley was apparently unaware of it. They competed for—and here he was for a time puzzled—for Julie in a sense, and for Sara and Sam, perhaps even for the children. In Lundrigan's eyes, if not in Cowley's, they were obliged to make a choice between himself and Peter, between the ways of reason and unreason. And Cowley was the one, as Lundrigan saw it, who had succeeded.

The success was certainly not generally conspicuous, he understood, but that was scarcely a consolation since it was conspicuous enough to him. They had not, these friends, gone to Peter and said we are yours, we have renounced maturity of mind for extravagance of blinding and ill-considered hope, but this seemed to Lundrigan to be, in one way or another, their direction. At least it was Cowley who had affected their lives, not he. It was Cowley who had set them thinking, either as wildly as Dr. Lavender or as quietly as, say, Sara, in new terms; it was Cowley who had influenced their actions themselves, had caused, indirectly but surely, Mollie's departure, Dr. Lavender's death, who knew what else, and now, unless he could himself prevent it, Julie's decision to go away for what remained of the summer. They had all, Lundrigan decided, gone over to Cowley's side if only to the

degree that it was around Cowley that they might be said to revolve, whereas he, Lundrigan, stood gauchely, irritatedly, alone. The competition, the game, was nearly over now, and everyone had found his man except for him. He, as he had thought before, was destined to be the next It, the slowest and grubbiest of them all, and hence it was that, assisting Julie now in lifting aside a table so that the floor beneath might be swept, he continued trying with some fervor to persuade her not to go, to remain, like him, unspotted by the folly, as again he put it, of taking decisive and dubiously wise action as the result of such trifling and foolish events as these.

"Stay, Julie," he said, watching her bend down with her dustpan and brush. "Children don't have memories. Maybe things have been unpleasant for them, but they'll have forgotten it all in a week. And you," he looked over at the photograph he had seen her examining when he entered, aware now that she was following his glance, "you've been through worse before and risen above it."

"I'm not sure, Dick," she said, still on her knees but looking up at him, "You mean Tim. . . ." She mentioned her husband's name so rarely that Lundrigan, at the sound of it now, winced at the idea of having purposely recalled it to her as the strongest way he knew of reminding her of his position as one of the dead man's closest friends and hence as a counselor to be heeded. "But I'm not sure I ever *have* risen above it." Her voice was thick with cold, and again she blew her nose. "I mean I've never found anything to take his place. If Sara died, Sam would still have his books; and

if he died, there'd still be that whole sculpture business for Sara. But I never had anything like that because even though there're the children, they're not enough." She paused for a moment, kneeling there, and then continued slowly.

"It seems as if everybody has something to live by except me. You have your job, even poor old Dr. Lavender had at least whatever his strange, strange idea was, and then of course Peter. . . ." Her eyes questioned him, searched his sharp face for some kind of answer, but he said nothing. "Everybody has *something*, but I don't. So I'm not sure I've ever risen above anything, and I'm not going to stay around trying to rise above this. It's all so sad and confusing and reminds me of whatever's lacking inside myself. Everything reminds me. Just playing that silly game outside the other evening made me cry like an idiot, and now all these awful things that have happened. So I'm really going to leave, Dick, and take the kids with me, and maybe . . ."

"Maybe you're right," Lundrigan said. He stood for an instant aghast at the suddenness of his reversal. Touched as he had momentarily been by a new sense of Julie's plight, it had been only momentary, and his will to convince her for the sake of thus triumphing, in his private terms, over Cowley's ascendancy had quickly, even as he spoke, over-powered it. Yet still he had reversed his stand, had said that perhaps, after all, it was better that she go. And why, why? Because, and he turned from her as the answer came to him and walked toward the window, because he knew that if she stayed as he had at first advised her, she might find, or at

least think that she had found, something to replace what she had spoken of as lacking within her. And what she would find, he had felt suddenly certain, would be—he tried to remember the very way in which Cowley had once put it to him—"the words and example of Christ" or, to rephrase it in his own tongue, the seductive and irrational platitude to which Julie, in her present quandary, would be now so vulnerable. And that was a victory he would not cede Cowley. "Perhaps you are right," he said, turning towards her once more. "Perhaps you'd better go."

She stood there in the sunlight, the dustpan in her hand, gazing at him uncertainly. Pleased as she was that he now agreed with her, she did not understand it. There was so much, she thought, so much that she did not understand.

The picnic supper that evening was Sara's idea. "Just to clear the air," she had said to Sam, "a return to, oh Lord, 'normalcy,' if that's a word. Something," she had gone on, "I've got to do *something* that makes some kind of sense again. And I've asked Mollie. She called as she'd promised, and when I told her everything that'd happened and how I needed her, she said she'd come. Thank heavens! I mean she's one of the few people we seem to know who'd be a real help now, who'd help, just by being around, to make us look a little less like a madhouse. And oh Sam, such a madhouse . . . !" It was the madness, the bizarreness of what had occurred that she stressed, for those seemed the easiest terms in which to deal with it at least in conversation. To speak of

Dr. Lavender's death as fantastic helped her to look upon it with the detachment that she could not yet, in her mind, achieve.

On the morning when she had confronted him with Fendall's charge and after he had left her, she had decided anew that she must take this curious wedding far less seriously, must make it somehow clear to both Dr. Lavender and the children themselves that she considered it as no more than a kind of foolish game, and so earnestly did she try to see it in this new light that she ended by almost convincing herself and found it possible to continue with her morning affairs more or less as though she had never heard of the matter at all. She had been able to let her mind stray in other directions altogether, to her unfinished statue, to the veal she had ordered for lunch, to Sam, the glasses that had been broken the evening before, but then, when she learned that Dr. Lavender had not returned for lunch with Peter and the children, she had begun to worry once more about what he had done and the unkindness with which she had addressed him. Perhaps, it occurred to her, he had departed for good, offended, misjudged, and she had set about to discover what she could. His belongings were still in his room; Sam, when she asked him, said that he had not seen the old man all day; Peter she was unable to find; and consequently she had turned at last to the children.

They were playing near the house, and did *they*, she had called from a window, know where Dr. Lavender might be. It was at this point that she remembered how she had intended and then forgotten to speak to them of what they

had been put through that morning, but her anxiety for Dr. Lavender postponed this once again. At the sound of his name they stopped playing, dropped the slippery ball they had been tossing from one to another, and stood silently before her without replying. She had been obliged to repeat her question before Fendall finally stepped forward and said that he believed that Dr. Lavender had hurt himself. Hurt himself bad, Daisy had added with an air of considered finality. Sara then returned to Sam, who had by this time been joined by Peter, and the three of them left the other children and followed Fendall through the woods to the tree-house. There they had at last come upon him, lying on the damp grass just as he had fallen some hours earlier.

Before the two men had been able to carry him away, Sam had suddenly turned pale and reeled back against the tree so that Peter had gone first to him, making him sit down and forcing him to keep his head low between his knees while he himself, after kneeling for a moment beside the old man, had stood by Sara with his arm about her shoulders until his cousin was able to rise again. Whatever they had said, she could not remember later, but only that she had remained there for a few minutes with her face hidden in her hands and then, breaking away from Cowley, had rushed back alone to the children.

And so it was a little desperately that she had several days later, when speaking to Sam of her plans for a picnic, referred to the entire situation of the last few weeks in general rather than to any particular event; and Sam, only too grateful to accept it on this comparatively undemanding

level, pressed her no further. A picnic might well be a way of clearing the air as she had put it, he said, certainly Mollie's presence would help to distract them all, and so it had been agreed upon between them.

In order to have a setting as little reminiscent of any part of the immediate past as they hoped the resultant atmosphere itself would be, they chose a beach some distance away from the one where they had taken the children just one week earlier, on the Fourth of July. It lay on a far less populous section of shore than the other, and hence, for all that it was a Sunday evening, they had it entirely to themselves. The Dunn household arrived first, Peter, the children, all of them, and set about preparing for the arrival of Julie and Lundrigan, who had promised to meet Mollie's train and drive her over with them and the two little McMoons later. Although a stiff breeze was blowing out from the shore, the air was warm and the day still so bright that the children were allowed to wear their bathing-suits and, with the sun falling hot on their bare backs, dug little seats into the area of sand sheltered by the dunes. Sara, in a low-backed dress and wearing a floppy straw hat with a huge cartwheel of brim, helped Sam to lay out on a striped cloth the rather too elaborate array of food and drink they had brought as a kind of last precaution against what they had both secretly feared might be the failure of their attempt to salvage the summer from the wreckage into which they felt it recently to have fallen. If nothing else succeeded, there would still, they implied with every Thermos bottle, each plate of cold chicken and ham, every bowl of potato salad, the glasses, bucket of ice, paper-

wrapped sandwiches, all of it—there would still, they protested with each new article they set out in the sunlight, be enough simply in the way of nourishment and stimulant to divert them from any considerations more profound than those which concerned the limits of their separate capacities. Sam, kneeling barefooted in the sand, held a bunch of purple grapes high against the blue sky for a moment before setting it down on a plate; Sara rescued a bottle of gin from the waving feet of George Bundle, who was digging near her. Peter was walking slowly along the edge of the dunes gathering driftwood for a fire.

When their preparations were over and before the others had arrived, there was a move made towards the water, and only Sam and Sara remained behind to watch the children run to the sinuous line that marked the wet sand from the comparatively dry, stop for an instant there, and then, one by one, to varying depths, dash into the cool and foaming advance of sea. Ellie was the last to enter it, pausing to tuck her straight brown hair into her bathing-cap and to place her glasses carefully upon her towel before joining her companions. The surf was not heavy, but there were waves enough for their purposes. With the receding swirl sucking the sand out from beneath his feet and then rolling back to spatter his legs with spray, Harry Fogg leaned forward for a moment before diving straight into a tottering green ridge while Ellie, staying nearer the shore and holding her short skirts in place with both hands, ducked quickly up and down, up and down, in the churning wake of it. Fendall and George stood out just beyond the breaking point, only their heads

visible above the glittering surface, squirting slender streams of water at each other from their puffed cheeks and puckered mouths. A gull circled through the air above them, and Fendall waved to his mother on the beach. Holding the brim of her hat with one hand, she waved back with the other as Cowley approached with an armful of twisted, gray sticks.

Suddenly Rufus, who had been lying stretched out on his back and letting the water wash up over him, indicated with a cry what they saw then to be the beginnings of a particularly large wave just starting to rise high and dark where the water was otherwise calm. Cowley dropped his firewood and ran to join them where they all stood now, even Ellie, up to their shoulders and facing the shore but peering back always to gauge the very time and place at which, with a leap, they could catch themselves up in the great, curling rush and go speeding forward with it, tumbled by all the rough chill of that sparkling weight, towards the slope of sand. The instant came, and off they went, their arms straight out before them, buoyed up and buffeted onward through the salt and frothing surge as the wave descended with a crash against the beach and sent them gliding on their chests across the sandy floor. Only Harry, who had not leapt quite quickly enough, was left behind to see beyond their heads and thrashing hands and feet the arrival over the dunes of the rest of their party.

Julie and Lundrigan came first, and just behind them, with Daisy and Timmy each holding one of her hands, walked Mollie. The wind flapped her skirt against her legs, swept her light hair back from the temples, and she kept her eyes closed, her head tipped up a little, against the soft rush of

it as she let the children guide her forward. Not until she reached the very edge of the dune did she leave them and go running down the powdering slope alone, her slim arms extended for balance, her bare feet scattering little clouds of sand.

Harry took a deep breath and dived to the bottom where he clutched two fistfuls of pebbles and, still submerged but twisting over onto his back now, released them to float slowly down, as in a dream, about him. Within an instant of having seen her again, he knew and, grasping his knees to his chest and rising gently towards the surface, shuddered to know, that whatever became of his life, however brilliant his success might be, this girl would remain always the object of his deepest and most poignant yearning. There would be, he thought as the blue sky burst above him and his head reeled with the first gust of fresh salt air, there would be forever an emptiness somewhere within him that no one, nothing, not even the other Ugly, could ever fill; not even Uglies were sufficient one unto another, and his pale eyes grew dim with knowing this as he swam slowly towards the shore where his friends were running to greet the newcomers and Mollie stood, her hands on her hips, laughing, to receive their greeting. Cowley, dripping with water, shook her hand, then turned with her to the children.

When the night came, Sara, who sat against one of the little mounds which George Bundle had dug, leaned over and laid both hands flat on the sand for a moment in order to steady the beach that seemed to rock like an enormous disc

floating through the dark beneath her. There were voices on every side, and leaning back once more to the reassuring immobility of the stars, she recognized one of them as Julie's. Wicked, wicked Julie, she thought, who had endangered the painstakingly planned serenity of the occasion by saying almost as soon as she had come that she was going to take her children and go away somewhere for the rest of the summer. And that, of course, reminded everybody immediately of what they had come out here to forget. It was so annoying of Julie. Perhaps she had not said *why* she was going, but there had been, after all, no need to; everyone knew. She was going because nothing was right here any longer, because there was much that had happened that was not right, and because the summer rocked beneath them all now like the beach itself. One drank a little too much perhaps when everything except the stars was trembling, so damn her, Sara thought, not for going, but for speaking of it. Sitting there with her head tipped back, she could hear her speaking of it again now to Sam, who was answering "Yes," the darkness muffling his voice, "Yes, yes," with such courteous sympathy, "Yes." Damn them both, and how strange not to have noticed before this that Julie was a toad, and Sam . . . but no common, but a fairy-tale toad with a pearl glistening in its forehead, a prince among toads, a pearl, a fairy tale, lying there on his elbow, saying "Yes" to Julie, with his great frogfootman calves stretched out upon the blue sand. It was richly possible to hate them both.

"Fendall," she called rather faintly in a sudden desire to lavish affection upon someone, but he and his companions

were too occupied with Peter to notice. "Animal, vegetable or mineral?" their question reached her. "Toad," she whispered.

"Come talk to a lonely old woman."

Leaving Lundrigan, Mollie came, and Sara reached out to touch her soft bell of hair. "Nobody *knows* how lonely," she sighed to her, suddenly certain that the whole night had been arranged as a setting for what she felt to be the profundity of this remark. "Nobody, nobody. But then, it's what we've got to expect, we who are artists. . . ." She encouraged Mollie with a sad smile to see herself too in this category. "Today we cry our hearts out over some lonely misery, some toad, something, and tomorrow . . . back to the salt mines, back to the drawing-board, the lump of clay, the . . ." She grasped out into the cool air with one vague hand to find the word she lacked.

"How's it going?" Mollie asked her. "How's the work going, Mrs. Dunn?"

"The work?" Sara regarded the girl's face intently by the dim light of the subsiding fire and decided that it was difficult, if not altogether impossible, to be as affectionate as she had wanted to be to anyone who looked as much as did Mollie like a young angel. So really young, Sara thought, and touched her own face for the web of wrinkles that she was confident spread out there. "The work, my dear, stinks," she said.

Mollie protested.

"Is it little enough to put in your pocket?" Timmy McMoon could be heard to ask during their pause, and "No"

Cowley replied. "Is it beautiful?" Ellie asked, sitting close to George Bundle. "Yes." Daisy had filled her left ear with sand and could hear nothing out of it. Lundrigan sat cross-legged now near Cowley.

"Do hand me that glass," Sara said and then continued. "It stinks," she repeated, "and do you wonder why? Why because I have a family, of course. I have a husband, for instance, who needs me *desperately*. Sammy depends on me for everything, and he'd be lost if I spent as much time working as I ought to." She laughed melodically at this. "So of course the work suffers. And then you know about everything that's happened since you left. . . ."

"The kids, you mean," Mollie said in a low voice, "and—"

"Dr. Lavender. But we don't speak of it. Oh, and Mrs. McMoon's leaving, you know," she added with heavy irony.

"She told me."

"Naturally, she's telling everybody." Mollie made no reply to this, and so there was another little pause. "Look at them," Sara continued after a time, waving her hand to indicate the entire group. "How fantastic to realize that in a few hours they'll all be fast asleep! No matter what they're thinking about now—and oh you can tell some of them are really thinking hard, so hard they can barely hear what they're saying, like me for instance—no matter what they're thinking about now, soon their minds will go clicking off like a refrigerator when it's gotten cold enough inside, and there they'll all lie in their beds without a single thought in their heads, just so many bodies spread out in the dark. Imagine it! A third of your life you're asleep, so that if you're thirty,

say, you can't claim you've *lived* thirty, but only twenty. For twenty years you've lived, and for the other ten you've only lain in the dark, unconscious except maybe for a dream, just like a dead person. So *strange*, Mollie, and so sad. . . . Have you ever seen a dead person?"

"Never close to," she replied. "I've never seen their faces." Why, on such a night as this, the sea glittering almost at their feet, all those pleasant things still to drink, the stars, Lundrigan's guitar lying untouched on the sand, why, she wondered, must they speak of death? Why indeed had she consented to return at all? These people, she thought, had everything and nothing too: contrary to what Sara had told her, Mr. Dunn, she felt certain, needed his wife about as desperately as he needed a hole in the head, for thus she put it to herself; and Mrs. Dunn herself, for all her seriousness about her "work," a word which Mollie could never hear in such a context without smiling, knew apparently that it—stunk, so where did that leave *her*?

"Well don't," Sara was saying intensely, "*don't* ever see one . . . especially not their faces because that's the worst of all. That pathetic old man . . . all crumpled up like a doll and staring up into the tree. Even Sam was almost sick. But I wasn't going to speak of that."

"Don't then," Mollie said. "If you weren't going to speak of it, then I wouldn't. There's no point. It wasn't anybody's fault, and it's all over anyway."

"It was *my* fault!" Sara exclaimed with some drama just as Lundrigan approached them.

"It's a fine picnic, Sara Dunn," he said.

"It's a horrible picnic. It's all perfectly horrible, but at least I'm not going to run away like some I could mention. I'm going to stick it out."

"Well," Lundrigan said expansively, unsure of what he was going to say next, sure only that he was not going to be forced into discussing Julie's decision to leave. "Well, and so you should. After all, you've got your school to run." His tone grew easier as he found a topic. "The show, you know, must go on. Somebody's got to keep a roof over the kids' heads while they get their education."

"Oh, but not now," Sara insisted. "Now that they're married, they've got to fend for themselves. And as for their education, what can anybody possibly teach them that they haven't learned here already!" Her laughter struck Lundrigan as a perilous substitute for whatever her unnaturally loud voice had implied that she might otherwise be about to do, and he was grateful for her next sudden suggestion. "Play us a song!" she commanded. "Play us something on the guitar."

"Sure, but what would you like?"

"Oh . . . a hymn," she said. "I think we all need a hymn. Play now, and everybody will sing. Everybody must sing!" she called so that all of them heard and turned in her direction.

Lundrigan found his instrument and strummed a few preliminary chords as they all watched him in silence. "A hymn," he muttered and kept his head slightly down, his sharp glance fastened to the dark line of the shore, while his fingers plucked the strings uncertainly. The breeze feathered his black hair

and brightened what remained of the fire. The water lapped up a little way along the beach, then receded with a faint hiss, and the air was mild with summer. His face softened strangely as a melody came to him, and he raised his head towards the invisible horizon as he began to play it.

Now the day is over,

Night is drawing nigh . . . Sara started to sing in her surprisingly high and thin soprano, stopping only when she realized that no one else had done so, that Lundrigan was apparently going to play it through first unaccompanied by their voices. Very slowly and tenderly he strummed it, his mouth only barely curved now with the remnant of a smile that Sara could not identify as ever having seen him give before, and not until he had completed several verses did he gesture to his listeners to join him. Except for the Uglies, none of the other children but Ellie knew the words, and

Shadows of the evening

Steal across the sky . . . she sang, her hands folded in her lap, her voice clearer and stronger than anyone else's, an unhurried and flute-like anthem of something like resignation. Sara fixed her with a melancholy stare and then, her own singing growing fainter as the pathos of her interest became more general, permitted her glance to wander past the other faces about her. There was not one of them, she found, that did not move her almost beyond bearing as the firelight flickered them into varying degrees of prominence against the background of night; so immensely alone and unprotected they seemed to her beneath the great height of stars and with all the rimless ocean stretching out behind

them that she forgave even Julie and sang, not without a tremor, .

*Grant to little children
Visions bright of thee;
Guard the sailors tossing
On the deep, blue sea. . . .*

Oh *I* am the one who's been the toad, she thought, and gave what felt, as she gave it, like the most disarming of all smiles to Julie, who sat alone now, her eyes closed and leaning back on her elbows. To Mollie, Mollie whom she had addressed so unpleasantly, she gave her hand, laying it gently on her warm, young arm. With a slight movement she knocked over her glass so that the liquid made a tiny pock-mark in the beach, and well, bless them, bless them all, she thought, and was deeply touched by her own magnanimity as their voices continued to rise with vesperal slowness through the dark.

Sam, who had left Julie and pulled himself across the sand to Cowley, bent his head close to the young man's ear and whispered to him. "A fine evening, isn't it, my tender-hearted cousin? A shimmering evening, shimmering . . . and you and I must have a little talk to celebrate it." He succeeded in drawing him a short distance away from the other singers and only then realized that he had no clear idea as to what they were going to have their little talk about. But this appeared to disturb him not at all, for he only motioned his companion to sit down beside him and then smiled as placidly and reassuringly as though they had already talked

a great deal and this was no more than the brief interlude of silence they might inevitably expect. Peter returned his smile but, without trying to initiate a conversation himself, simply echoed softly the verse that came drifting towards them.

*Comfort every sufferer
Watching late in pain . . .*

"Suffering is decidedly not modern, Peter," Sam abruptly said. "In the old days, yes. I can remember, for instance, my mother. . . . She used to suffer several times a week, usually in the mornings, but it was a dying occupation even then, and by late afternoon she would almost always be on to something else. Already in my mother's day there were beginning to be so many more diverting entertainments, and suffering, like charades, family quartets, conversation—the simple pleasures that could be indulged in quietly at home—started to give way to the more titillating excitements of . . . what? . . . the movies, of course, transoceanic voyagings, wars on a truly grand scale, and so forth. Rather a pity, I think. And you, Peter, what do you think?"

Still dressed in his bathing-suit but wearing a loose sweater now, Cowley dug his heels into the sand and watched the movement of his own toes for a moment or two before replying. That Sam had spoken in bland jest was easy for him to see, nor was he in any sense disturbed by it, but, as always, he found it unreasonably difficult to respond with equal levity. He looked up to acknowledge his cousin's gaze and smiled unsurely.

"Suffering . . ." he began without finishing. "I'm not so sure that it's died out. Or, if it had, I'm not sure that it would be . . ."

"Ah, but it has," Sam interrupted. "It has died out, I'm certain. Take me as an example. I haven't suffered for years and years. I can't even remember the last time. Worried, yes; I do that constantly. Worry's very modern and just beginning now to come really into its own, but that's a very different matter, of course. The heart suffers, but it is just the mind that worries. The mind and possibly the stomach too."

Cowley looked at him with such earnestness, and his round face seemed, in the dim light of the fire, so impossibly young that Sam could not help but laugh faintly as he answered him. "I wonder," he said. "A pretty thought, but I'm not certain. Let's consider the possibility, however. Let's take your case—calling it, for easy reference, the Cowley Case. Do you have a heart, Peter? But wait, instead of answering that, answer in its place whether or not you've suffered. Think now."

"I think . . ." he started but paused then, pulling his knees up and resting his forehead upon them. "Compared to other people—people you and I know, have known—maybe I haven't. But . . ."

"Well, but let's leave it at that. Then the other question in our pursuit of the heart—the hart, you know, that ancient pun—" he gave a little wave with his hand as though to summon up a wealth of quotation, "the other question is have you ever loved, Peter?"

"Yes," he replied, his head still bowed.

"Have you, have you," Sam murmured inconclusively several times, his voice finally trailing away altogether so that the sound of the singing could be heard again. They had turned to some other melody now, louder, livelier, with all the children joining in, their trebles sharp in the clear air. "Well. Well, but we must grant you half a heart then." He smiled as if to end the discussion.

"If you mean what you say," Peter looked up at him questioningly, "although you're probably only joking, then that's not enough, I think. Half a heart is not enough."

"Enough for what? I should have thought it was rather too much. Too much heart, you know, and the ice splits. Starwise perhaps, but splits still. A case in point exists."

"Enough to help me understand the people I must help to . . . understand." He looked away for a moment towards the sea. "If it's Tom you meant, maybe what you say about too much heart is true. But he was so nearly right, you know. I'm not sure but that he wasn't the best and wisest of us all. Wrong, wrong, but *just* wrong. Tom . . ."

They were silent for a time until Sam, by touching his cousin's sleeve, drew his attention once more.

"What will you do, Peter, when the summer's over I mean? This 'helping' you speak of . . . Are you going to be one of those barrel-thumping evangelists who insist upon pronouncing the word 'God' as though it was 'Gut,' a militant mystic, a real Christian zealot? I'm not making fun, because they're as respectable professions as most any other I could mention. I'm only curious."

"Perhaps," Cowley answered, laughing. "That might be it. I've got a strong voice."

"No more teaching then?"

"Not little boys anyway."

"The heathen Chinee possibly? The impoverished multitudes?"

"No," Cowley answered. "You, I think. You and Sara, Julie, Dick . . . you know the kind I mean."

"Oh yes," Sam grinned, taking a sip from his glass and then thrusting it into the breast pocket of his jacket. "I know, I know. So we're to be the ones then. Well, I can only praise your valiance. You won't find us easy, although I daresay you've learned that already. The first time you say anything, even the glittering truth itself, so that it sounds however remotely like a cliché, you'll lose half of us because that's an indelicacy we can't forgive. And as soon as you start trying to appeal to our—what do they call them?—our *emotions*, you'll find the other half has also gone because that's a breach of taste they simply won't have been able to abide. And if we can commit a sin against arithmetic to the extent of picturing a third half, you'll have sent them packing at most seven minutes after you've begun to speak of either the rewards of following, or the punishments of not following, your word, His word if you prefer. We're too clever to react to threats or bribes, and don't remind us of our peculiar faults because we're fully aware of them as it is, and don't ignore them either because they're a source of considerable pride to us. Poor old Peter," he continued, raising his voice in order to be heard above the increased volume of the singing, "it's

a tricky game you'll have to play. I said a tricky game," he repeated, louder still. Sara was beckoning them to return, plucked a grape from the bunch beside her and tossed it at them to draw their attention, but before Sam would either move or allow his companion to move, he spoke once more.

"Teach us," he said, bending his head close to Peter's, "teach us to love maybe. Better still, perhaps, teach us to suffer . . . but that is something you must first learn yourself, cousin, something you *will* learn, I imagine. And at the same time, don't neglect to laugh at yourself a bit, and at us, because there can be little under the sun quite so amusing as a game of blind-man's-buff played on the scale you've chosen to play it. Then maybe we'll listen to you. Maybe we won't, of course, but the advice is still excellent, and remember it, Peter, remember it because never, so help me, will I give it again. I've betrayed my kind enough as it is.

"And now," he concluded, rising to his feet, "let's join the ladies."

"Yes," Cowley said, smiling, "the ladies. And thank you," he continued, shaking his cousin's hand, "thank you for . . ."

"Don't mention it."

Sara moved over on the sand to make room for them between herself and Mollie. They all sat in a circle now about the replenished fire which the children watched through large eyes dazed with drowsiness and fascination while the Uglies, leaning against each other back to back, were more intent upon their observation of Lundrigan. He stood in their midst, his guitar cradled against him and looking down into the confusion of flame so that his dark eyes glistened, singing

all alone the song that had once been so raucously favored by Julie, himself and the late McMoon.

"*Leeeanning, leeeeanning . . .*" he sang, his clear tenor prolonging the vowels into a melancholy burlesque.

"*Leeeanning on the Er-er-las-ting . . . Crutch,*" he concluded instead of "Cross," plucking a particularly deep chord from the strings and glancing up at his listeners, but there was no one of them attentive enough to have noticed the substitution. The children continued wondering at the fire, and the grownups, with the possible exception of Julie, either watched their wonder or, leaning their heads back, peered up into the astronomy of the summer night.

Chapter Sixteen

IF NO one of them ever denied either openly or secretly that the place was, during the months of summer, rather more beautiful than could well be imagined, neither were any two of them ever in accord for very long as to just what made it so. Some, of course, insisting upon and deprecating the comparative similarity of all such landscapes in general, would name the house itself apart from any aspect, however seductive, of its setting, because the house, they would say, was undeniably unique, because the house was . . . but then, even within this group, there was dissension. Why was it unique, how did it surpass in charm all that green of lawn and trees and earth—and disagreements as numerous as there were people to disagree would ensue. For one thing, it sprawled, sprawled and climbed and extended in such a variety of directions that there was hardly a corridor that did not turn unexpectedly and confront the visitor with a problem of rooms, scarcely a room that could not be reached by any one of several doors and that did not thus enrich forever either the possibility of the felicitous escape or, as others

would have put it, the hazard of the unsolicited encounter. Furthermore, and this applied not only to the inmates themselves but to whatever welcome breeze there happened to be, there were at least two ways of getting almost anywhere, and a choice could always be made between one stairway and another, between a hall, an intervening chamber and a passage along one of the many porches. Nor was this labyrinthine quality unimplied by the white frame exterior, cool and shaded here by bushes or a trembling fan of branch, hot and glittering there where the sunlight fell unimpeded, for eaves projected at curious angles, dormers looked out towards one another, hedges concealed terraces jutting from corners, and, all in all, the house was quite as tortuous, quite as baffling and inconsistent, within as without.

There was, of course, a far greater simplicity about the grounds. The garden of pebbled paths and stone swan became a lawn, and farther still, beyond a wall, the lower lawn sloped towards the pond. The wood rose there, continued indeed up either side of the slope of grass, and merged again to the rear of the house where, a few hundred yards farther back, it ended finally at the border of the field that stretched out to the west; spread, rolling and uneven, towards the little hill and past it. It was the greenness and serenity of these surroundings and the changing shapes of sun upon them, the movement of the wind through these leaves and across those surfaces of still water and turf, that a good many claimed to be the principal beauty of the Dunns' home, but the subject was not one upon which any enduring agreement had ever been reached.

There was, then, still another house on that same land, but its whereabouts were known only to a very few, and its functions were so varied and many, its history so vast, that even the initiate found difficulty in remembering all that there was to remember about it. Emperors and great warriors had both triumphed beneath its roof and, later, their faces pressed against its earthen floor, had expired there too with the scent of pine as their final memory, their last sighs lost in the sifting and rustling of its fragrant walls. Women had rocked and crooned their babies to sleep in its twilight, and merchants, their zealous hands stained from touching its lintels, had purveyed their wares within its limits—acorns and caterpillars, lozenges of hardening sap, dead birds, the tiny cadavers of gnomes mummified beyond recognition, the answers to certain shattering questions, and flowers. Once a cowboy had been tickled until he was sick upon the threshold, and not long afterwards a policeman had climbed high into the gnarled rafters and endangered with his screams of excitement the success of an operation being performed below by an eminent surgeon of his acquaintance. But if the house had known melodrama and sensation, it had experienced too the simplest rituals of human existence, for meals had been ordered, prepared and devoured there, clothes had been mended, the weather discussed, and almost every common chore or diversion of which man is capable had at one time or another been engaged in within the bounds of that storied enclosure.

To anyone who had never taken part in the drama of its past, this dwelling appeared to be no more than a particularly

large pine tree that grew in the woods behind the Dunns' house not far from the meadow to which Cowley had led his friends some days earlier, and beneath whose wide sweep of bough the children played now, on the afternoon following Sara's picnic, the game that had neither a beginning nor any end but was simply a continuation of everything that had ever been played there before. Roles changed, and today's aged beggar might be day after tomorrow's most reckless young aviator, the afternoon's tyrant might become the object of the evening's tyranny, but a curiously consistent atmosphere prevailed, a sameness of intensity and direction, that fused all personages and events, however diverse, into a single, panoramic legend. The fragment of it that they had chosen for this specific Monday was a rather quiet one and one which, with only slight variations, they had enacted at other times in the past.

The origins and details were obscure, but in general it concerned the career of a family. The head of the family was a mother, and the mother was Ellie Sonntag, but her leadership was more theoretical than real, for upon her children, Daisy and Timmy McMoon, had been imposed the obligation of misbehaving as ingeniously and unceasingly as they found possible. So successful were they at this that it was frequently necessary for Ellie to enlist the services of either the legal or the medical profession, and this she would always do with an air of superb desperation. Fendall was the policeman who, as the result perhaps of long association with criminal types, had developed, himself, methods of such violence and stealth

that he not only was of little assistance to her and no comfort, but would occasionally, to her greater woe, go even so far as to side with the children. Consequently she was likely to turn more often to the doctor, who was George Bundle. He, on the other hand, was a true bulwark against calamity and could be counted upon both to cure her own wounds and to perform amputations of whatever members her children had used to inflict them. With patience and strength he would remove at the wrist the hand that had plunged the dagger into her ribs, or the feet that had kicked the burning stove over upon her, and this afternoon he was obliged to sever Daisy's head for having made a face so horrible that even now Ellie lay in a swoon upon the needle-covered earth. When the operation was over and the little girl had gone staggering off with her fingers in her ears, and her eyes and mouth shut tight, in an effort to simulate decapitation, he proceeded methodically to the aid of her prostrate mother.

Timmy stood at the tree's edge watching with interest while Fendall, for lack of any more appropriate means of disconcerting the invalid, simply fired a cannon again and again into the sky with great shouts of enthusiasm. The Uglies, who never participated for long at a time and who, when they did, would always choose guises as unsuited as they could invent—if all the others, for instance, were trying to create some subdued, domestic scene, they would inevitably enter as posturing tragedians or lunatic revolutionaries, whereas in the midst of the most farciful fracas they would insist upon being unnervingly themselves—the Uglies sat be-

neath the tree near Ellie but with their backs to her, leaning against the trunk and paying little attention to anything beyond their own conversation.

With George Bundle kneeling beside her, his thumb pressed against her pulse, the mother lay there on the soft earth, her face upturned but her eyes closed behind her glasses. It was very hot, and her dress felt damp and prickly against her back. She wanted to scratch, but could she, she wondered with panic, move at all, or was she truly as smitten as she lay there pretending to be, not by shock at her daughter's brutality but as an awful punishment for her past wickedness. Perhaps she would never move again, and she dreaded even to try for fear that she could not. But yes, she raised her fingers slightly and then let them fall again, she could. Yet her relief was only momentary because it struck her that this meant only that the punishment was still ahead of her and almost sure to be far worse than just quietly dying here would be. It seemed to her that there was probably no limit at all to the tortures a person could expect who had dressed up like an angel to play a trick on a good man like Mr. Cowley and who then stood up and let herself be married to somebody by a sinful man like Dr. Lavender, and sinful he certainly must have been because Mrs. Dunn had just about said he was, had said he was old and not well and didn't know what he was doing, that they should try to forget the whole thing, but sinful was what she'd meant, and the real proof of it was that God had killed him and she could remember seeing him lying there dead just about the way she was lying there now herself. And there was more than this that she

could remember, did, in fact, remember as she lay there now, but rather simply as a feeling than as an event specifically recalled—how in the cool and gray of that secret room she had glanced to the side and seen as though through a mist the privately dreaming face of George Bundle, and how she had been for a little while so happy that she had sung a carol until the stone roof had echoed and the candle had flickered with the queer beauty of it. As Fendall's cannon shouted and her pulse drummed within her captive wrist, she wondered how terrible it was to have been happy about something that she had been told to forget yet had not forgotten, and how soon and from where she might expect her punishment. She drew her hand away from the doctor, rolled over on her side and groaned.

The doctor shook his head and glanced up at Timmy, who had come to stand by them.

"Your sister has killed her," he said somberly.

"Says you!" cried Timmy. "You have killed her, you quack, and now my sister will kill you!"

"She can't," George Bundle protested. "Her head's been cut off."

"Says you!" Timmy cried, and he ran to tell Daisy, who, still deaf and blind and mute, was hobbling about in circles beyond the low branches of the pine tree where bands of sun fell bright about her. Ordinarily he would have killed George Bundle himself, but today his sister was a person of some importance, and he was willing to leave it to her. They were both persons of more than ordinary importance because they were going away and everyone knew it and treated them

with deference because of it. The magic of the fact was irresistible and made such enchanted creatures of them both that even in his own eyes Daisy shone with the glory of it, and for the first time he saw her as capable of deeds which he had always before considered far beyond her slender capacities: of murder, for one thing, of surviving the loss of a head. They were going away, and whatever anybody else thought about, that was all Timmy McMoon could think about, and there was a new excitement in his stomach and a new authority to his voice as he pulled her fingers from her ears and told his sister what she must do.

Forewarned, George Bundle climbed up into the branches and continued climbing until he had gone as far as he could go and felt the thin upper limbs sway back and forth as they responded to his weight and the warmth of wind that rustled the feathery green needles about him. In one direction he could see the Dunns' house, in the other the expanse of open field, and above him a sky so blue and far away that it made him dizzy to behold it and he looked down instead at the tops of the smaller trees beneath him, at the little clearing directly below where Fendall stood firing cannonballs at him through the air. With his hands clasping the rough bough, he managed to raise himself just enough higher so that over the Dunns' roof he was able to see the far side of the pond, and he clung there, the twigs sharp against his bare legs and arms, watching it. It had been a week and a day since the last time he had gone fishing, and soon, he thought, he must go fishing again. How nice to go now, to jump off and glide slowly over the wood, the house and lawns, and then settle

gently down on the edge of the water where the sun was hot and water-bugs skimmed. A fish tugs the line ~~twice~~, then waits before starting to tug again, and the gills spread out and show the pink insides when the sun dries them. But how awful to fall, he thought, because he had climbed very high and something might break, so he decided to return to the ground and let them kill him. Cautiously he climbed, testing each branch before lowering his weight upon it.

"You will soon be needing an undertaker," Rufus Este said to Timmy, who, with Fendall and Daisy, was waiting for George Bundle to come down, "so allow me to introduce to you my colleague, Mr. Fogg."

"Formaldehyde Fogg," his colleague added, crossing his eyes and bowing.

"Well, undertaker her first," Timmy replied rather uncomfortably and pointed towards Ellie, who still lay on the ground. Harry walked over to her and measured in hands her length from the top of her head to the soles of her sneakers.

"She's a little large, I'm afraid," he said. "I specialize in midgets, you know, and this is rather out of my field. But perhaps . . ." he reached down and touched her shoulder as though about to roll her over on her back for a closer inspection, but she opened her eyes and turned to him.

"Go away," she said, "I'm sick."

"Ah, but after a severe shock, Madam . . ." Rufus spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders. "What can you expect? Your daughter makes a hideous face at you, so naturally you are no longer quite well."

"In fact," Harry said, "we thought you were quite dead. And ^{are} you absolutely sure that you're not? Permit me to . . ."

"I'm really sick," she repeated, her voice ardent now with despair. "Go away, all of you."

"Nuts," said Fendall, "let's put her out of her misery then," and he aimed his cowboy pistol and fired a number of shots into her head before joining the others who had already moved away.

"She is really two people dressed up to look like one," Harry was saying, helping Timmy to arm his sister with a little branch thrust down the back of her dress so that the leaves fell over her yellow hair like a kind of helmet, "and that of course puts quite a strain on her—on *them*, I mean."

"Whereas we," Rufus added, handing her the end of a fallen sapling much too heavy for her to raise, "are one person dressed up to look like two."

"She can't kill him with that," Timmy said. "She can't even lift it."

"Two what?" Daisy asked.

"Two Uglies," said Rufus.

"What's an Ugly?"

But before she had time to receive an answer, George Bundle jumped down from the lowest limb, and all three of them left Harry and Rufus behind to pursue him. They shouted that they had locked all the doors and windows, and hence he was restricted, in his effort to escape them, to the area beneath the tree where around and around they chased until Ellie was forced at last to rise and seek refuge in the

sunlight without. The Uglies watched for a while, and then wandered a short distance away.

"Do you know something?" asked Harry, sitting down on top of a vine-covered stump.

"Know what?" inquired Rufus.

"I have had a thought." He kicked his heels against the bark, and several heart-shaped leaves fell to the grass.

"Each time an Ugly has a thought," said Rufus, "the earth makes one more revolution per second around the sun. Some-day it'll be going so fast that everybody will spin right off."

"It was a thought about Uglies."

"Two more revolutions per second then. Oh, and look," he added, "the assassination is taking place."

George Bundle had been caught, and Fendall and the Mc-Moons were leaping about him, the air shrill with their cries. The branch that Daisy had been wearing thrust down the back of her dress had slipped sideways so that the leaves impeded her arm as she raised it to strike the fatal blow. This was all happening beneath the tree, but Ellie stood on the grass just beyond it, shouting that the doctor was innocent and should be spared. They were all shouting. George Bundle fell, groaning, and they dragged him out into the sun where they started to cover him with pine-needles. On a nearby hummock, a squirrel crouched, gibbering.

"Right on schedule," Rufus said and examined his wrist-watch. "In thirteen minutes they should begin carrying him home on a shutter."

"But home," protested Harry, "is where you hang your hat."

“Home,” Rufus corrected him, “is where you hang yourself,” ~~and~~ they both laughed so uncontrollably at this that the squirrel fled.

“We know, of course,” Harry continued at last, “what an Ugly is. . . .”

“Of course.”

“But I’ve decided now that I also know what a Person is.”

“Ah,” said Rufus, “that has always puzzled me.”

“I think that a Person is just an Ugly who doesn’t *know* he’s an Ugly.”

“Then you mean that everybody is . . . ?”

“Well, almost everybody.”

“How fascinating, Harry! But I wonder if you’re right. I wonder,” and his voice faded away in thought.

“Think about them,” Harry urged him, “think about People you know. We’ve always more or less imagined that horrible things just didn’t happen to them—that they’d never squashed birds with brown envelopes, never been in crowded rooms with their pants unbuttoned, things like that. You know. I’d always thought that when they passed a street accident or a cripple, they looked the other way **because** they really *wanted* to look the other way. And I never **used** to believe that they were ever very frightened by things, at least not frightened so the tops of their heads went cold and they planned what they’d do when the world came to an end—where they’d go and what they’d take with them. More than anything else, I didn’t think People knew what it was to be really lonely, how ugly, ugly loneliness was. When they

fell in love with a Person, I thought the Person fell in love with them. But look at them, Rufus. Look at them!"

"Dr. Lavender . . ." Rufus mused.

"Dr. Lavender. But maybe he *knew*; maybe he was a real Ugly. It's the ones who don't know I'm talking about."

"An Ugly is somebody who knows. The rest are People," Rufus reflected. "The Dunns, Lundundrigan, Mrs. McMunnoon. . . ."

"Yes, yes!" There was excitement in his voice, and his eyes were round with concentration. He rubbed the back of his neck and looked at his friend, whose hair seemed even redder than usual in the heavy light of late afternoon. He looked towards the tree and saw them burying George Bundle beneath the brown needles, silent now and engrossed in what they were doing. He thought of Mollie and gave a little moan; then he gave a great and low-pitched parody of a moan, and Rufus's face, which had been drawn in compassion, spread into a smile.

"I wonder how much *Cow* knows," he said, laughing.

"Yes," Harry replied, "I wonder about *Cow* too," and they sat there wondering for a time until at last Rufus arose.

"Somebody's coming," he said, and the crackling of branches in the direction of the Dunns' house and a glimmer of color through the leaves confirmed him.

"Shall we warn the others, my dear General?" asked Harry with a slight bow and a courtly wave of his hand towards the large tree.

"That might be amusing," Rufus replied, and they hastened away together.

George Bundle had scarcely time to rise and shake the pine-needles from his clothes, and his companions were just able to arrange themselves in casual attitudes upon the grass, when Lundrigan stepped out into the little clearing dressed for the city and carrying a hat in his hand.

Their bare arms and legs listless upon the soft green of the sod, and their hair disheveled, their faces smudged here and there with earth or pinebark, they sprawled there in the sun and, through the air misted with slow flickerings of gilded treedust and cut with an occasional band of shadow cast by the jutting of a bough, looked up with eyes wide and dazed as though from dreaming at the newcomer before them. As he stood there in his crisp, dark suit, each sharp feature distinct where theirs seemed somehow blurred and soft, his glance keen upon them and his lips only for a moment parted in a rapid smile, everything about him appeared to set him off as of another world from theirs. They were irretrievably part of the summer, and he, Lundrigan, incongruously alive among all that wealth of foliage and dappled light, a part now of something else—of the city perhaps, of another season.

"I've come to say goodbye," he announced, looking largely at Timmy and Daisy, to take leave of whom had been the greater part of his purpose. "It's back to work for me, and I'm leaving this afternoon." His words, ringing and confident as they were, seemed barely discernible against the muffling background of bird noises, the more distant chirping of the field's crickets, and for a precarious moment it was as if the children had not heard him or, hearing him, were too puzzled by the newness of his presence to respond. But Harry and

Rufus arose then to offer him their hands, and the others were also soon gathered about him. Timmy, jubilantly reminded of the imminence of his own departure, chattered with a degree of enthusiasm calculated to remind his companions of it too, and Daisy listened with rapture. Ellie stepped forward and wished Mr. Lundrigan a pleasant train journey, and Fendall advised him to sit near a window where the smells were not so bad. George Bundle expressed the hope that there would be no wreck because wooden bridges, he said, were undependable. And the air about them was still and fragrant although, above them, the high leaves fluttered.

It had been, for Lundrigan, an entire day of farewells. He had left Julie not long after lunch in order to avoid the necessity of any further discussion with her of her plans, for now that, encouraged by him, she had decided definitely to go, he considered his part in the affair ended and was resolved to dissociate himself from the actual carrying out of it. His desire to have her go away, away principally from the influence of Cowley, was still fervent enough for him to want to conceal it, even from himself, behind apparent disinterest; and then too, he had comfortably reasoned, disinterest was, after all, the most rational reaction to such trivia as just where she would ultimately stay, for how long, and so forth. These were details she could solve for herself, he had told her, affably, briskly, and then he had said goodbye and left her standing on her threshold with a pillowslip of laundry in her thin arms and smiling at once unsure, grateful, bemused. If, as with a little burst of gravel he drove off, this had seemed to him at all unfeeling on his part, he had at least

determined then to make a special effort to pay his farewell to ~~Tony~~ and Daisy. But first he had seen the Dunns.

Sam had been reclining in a canvas deck chair on the porch at whose side the two stone urns stood. A book lay open on his lap, but he had been asleep, at least his eyes had been closed, and Lundrigan waited for a moment or two before arousing him. It was a sad, almost, he thought, a stupid face when in repose, and then, touching Sam on the shoulder, he watched it change slowly again into a smile. "Not asleep," Sam had said, "just a green thought in a green shade," and he gestured towards the lawn and trees. They talked briefly and at last, as Lundrigan was about to leave, Sam had accompanied him back into the house and shaken his hand there. "Well," he said, and his voice had emerged mildly mocking from a stifled yawn, "our horizon will be the duskier for having lost the bright star of your intellect, Richard. We'll probably miss you, each in his peculiar way. . . . Peter most, perhaps. And I am being sincere," he added, his smile only faintly diminished. "And Sara too, of course. You'll find her at her artistic labors. Be honest, true and brave. . . ."

"Cheers," Lundrigan had replied.

Dressed in a long butcher's apron stained with dry clay and wearing a wilting flower in her black hair, Sara had left Mollie and her likeness to commune with one another in the cool of the secret room and answered Lundrigan's call by running up the stairs and joining him in the studio above. She kissed him warmly on both cheeks, straightened his necktie, patted him on the head and swore she did not know

what any of them would do without him. Nor did he, he said, and then, with emotion, laughing, she embr^{aced}ed him once more and disappeared back down the stairs but not before telling him in what direction she thought he might best look for the children. "Back to the salt mines!" she cried up through the dark passage, and Mollie's goodbye came ringing close behind. It was all as swift as that, and then he had stepped out into the summer to look for the little McMoons.

He stood there in the late afternoon sun with them now, with all of the children gathered about him, his hat in his hand and perspiration damp on his forehead. It was the last of his farewells, and he felt that the time had come when finally he might leave. There was suddenly something almost stifling to him about the dense greenness of the wood, the great pine spreading its heavy plumes out into the clearing and up towards the sky, bushes growing thick and full between the slenderer trees whose leaves had already started to fall here and there to the earth below; the very air he breathed seemed too sweet, too laden with sunlight and the scent of grass, and he was eager to be on his way. After leaning down and kissing the top of Daisy's head, he shook Timmy's hand, let one last, general smile suffice for the others, and turned to go. It was only then that he discovered Peter Cowley waiting a few steps behind him.

"Well, man!" Cowley exclaimed, "Sara told me I'd catch you around here somewhere if I hurried, and I'm mighty glad I did because I certainly wanted to see you before you got away. So you're really leaving us. . . ."

Yes, Lundrigan thought, he was really leaving them, and he saw that the children had wandered back to their tree so that the two of them were left alone. He was leaving indeed, but there seemed less reality about it now with Cowley blocking his way, standing with a book under his arm and his hands in his pockets. He tried to return Cowley's cordiality yet at the same time indicate that he was in a hurry.

"I'm afraid so, Peter," he replied. "I'm behind schedule as it is. Have to get back, you know. Back to . . . the salt mines. I knew I'd see you before I left."

"Well fine," Cowley said, "fine, and the best of luck to you with your work and everything. I wouldn't have missed knowing you, and I'm glad. . . ."

"And good luck to you," Lundrigan interrupted him. "Have a good summer. Maybe we'll meet again."

They stood closer now in the shade, and Lundrigan was already at the beginning of the path that led on to the Dunns' when, smiling, Cowley put his hand on his shoulder.

"We will meet again," he said, and as a breeze set the leaves above them in motion, their shadows trembled against the bright surface of his shirt and flickered across his placid features the illusion of countless expressions hitherto foreign to them, expressions of fear, mirth, suffering, all in the few moments that the shadows continued to move.

"Are you coming back this way?" Lundrigan asked after an instant's pause, motioning him to precede him if he was.

"No," Cowley answered. "I thought I'd take a little walk out the other direction. It's too nice to stay in."

"Well, so long then, my friend. I'm off."

"So long," Cowley answered, "so long till the next time."

Lundrigan proceeded along the path a few yards and then paused to look back. Cowley had stopped by the children and was crouched there speaking to them. Almost immediately then he arose and, tucking his book more firmly under his arm, started out into the woods on the far side of the clearing. He had not gone very far when, pushing aside a branch that barred his way, he disclosed for a moment what lay before him, the field spreading out green and broken by little hills beneath the summer sky. Another step forward, and the branch swung back and shut him from view.

The murmur of the children's voices carried soft and indistinct through the warm air, and Lundrigan continued down his path.

